

Abbas's Inconclusive Washington Visit and Netanyahu's Tactics

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On May 3rd, Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas traveled to Washington, DC, to meet with US President Donald Trump. Abbas's meeting with Trump followed that of several other White House guests from the region including Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in February (the first visitor from the region welcomed for an official visit), Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and Jordan's King Abdullah. As the Abbas-Trump meeting was coming together, news began to break that President Trump would be visiting the region soon. Shortly after his meeting with Abbas, while announcing an executive order on religious liberties, Trump disclosed that he would be heading to Saudi Arabia, then to Israel/Palestine, and then to the Vatican to meet with Pope Francis. This Abrahamic world tour arguably makes one thing very clear: if the "America First" Trump Administration has any global priorities, the Middle East is at the top of the list, for better or worse.

These developments make the dynamics of the Trump-Abbas meeting and the Israeli reaction to it even more interesting. During the transition period and in the early weeks of Trump's presidency, it was thought that his administration would simply allow the Israelis to do anything they pleased, including taking some significant steps in the West Bank like massive settlement building or even annexation, for which the Israeli right continues to clamor. Observers had good reason to believe that this would be the case given Trump's statements, the preferences of those who

surround him on this issue, and the way he behaved in reaction to last December's United Nations Security Council vote on Israel's illegal settlements.

Since then, however, while the Trump Administration has notably muted any criticism of Israeli settlements—criticism that had become more common during the Obama Administration—the potential paradigm shifting developments that were thought likely, like an annexation announcement on the part of the Israelis or an embassy move on the part of the Americans, have not happened. While this might change, Trump did tell Netanyahu that he would like to see him "hold back on settlements a little bit," suggesting he would take a more conventional approach to American peacemaking.

Going Along with Trump

It is hard to see how a Trump Administration, without the experience or even the staff in place in key positions of important agencies, could possibly succeed in peacemaking where all its predecessors failed. But the fact that the administration is choosing to play this role means that both Israeli and Palestinian leaders have to play along. Neither can afford to alienate the White House or be sure how the mercurial President Trump would respond to being rebuffed. This sets up a potential dynamic where both parties know they will not get to a deal under Trump, but they also do not want to be blamed for the inevitable failure of his attempts.

The Israelis are keenly aware of the high cost of the perception that they are the obstacle to peace, a perception they believe grew in the United States and particularly internationally during the Obama years and climaxed in the UNSC resolution on settlements. They were hoping Trump would alter this perception. So in his meeting with President Trump, Abbas made clear that he was prepared to go along and trusted the president's effort to bring the parties to an agreement. The subtext of this message from Abbas was clear: if a Trump initiative fails, it would not be the Palestinians' fault.

In the same week as the Trump-Abbas meeting, the Islamic Resistance Movement-Hamas released an updated version of its charter in which it accepted what it called the Palestinian national consensus around the principle of a two-state solution. Removed from this document were the previous anti-Semitic and conspiratorial language and the calls for the destruction of the state of Israel. In short, the new document fully commits to the rights of Palestinians; it frames the organization's efforts in a religious context but does so in relatively moderate language. This is a big problem for Israel precisely because of the powerful propaganda asset the old Hamas charter presented. Time after time, official and unofficial spokespersons for Israel have quoted from the outdated charter not only to characterize Palestinian resistance as terrorist but also to dismiss legitimate Palestinian grievances entirely, with great effect.

So as President Trump embraced Mahmoud Abbas, saying he was honored to meet with him, and as Abbas committed to work with Trump to get to a peace agreement, Israel's favorite boogeyman, Hamas, was working on changing its image through issuing a more moderate political document. As far as optics are concerned, this was not a good three-day stretch for Israel; Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who also holds the foreign ministry portfolio in the government, scrambled to respond by issuing statements slamming both Abbas and Hamas and accusing them of deception.

Netanyahu's Disappointments

Netanyahu was surely further unnerved by hearing Abbas, along with both the king of Jordan and Egypt's el-Sisi, repeat alongside Trump that the Arab Peace Initiative (API) remains a united Arab position. This was most recently reaffirmed at the 28th Arab Summit in Amman, which was attended by Trump's envoy Jason Greenblatt. Netanyahu has sought a regional approach and several pro-Israel interest groups have been pushing this in Washington as well. However, his desired approach differs in a very important way from the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative: the API requires an Israeli-Palestinian deal before Israel can have normalized ties with the Arab states.

Netanyahu, for his part, wants movement toward normalization either before or concurrently with a long, drawn out process, one that likely would not culminate in a deal but would offer instead some upgrades in

Palestinian economic conditions. For the Arab states, this “outside in” approach has been a nonstarter, despite the warmer ties some of them share with Israel due to a common concern over Iran’s foreign policy. For Netanyahu, the “outside in” approach affords him an opportunity to split the Arabs from the Palestinians and use the former to help force the latter to accept an outcome that leaves them with far less than statehood.

From Netanyahu’s perspective, the anxiety over how Trump may behave is understandable. For the past eight years, he feuded with Barack Obama and worked to politicize the US-Israel relationship in American politics, believing a Republican administration would reliably let the Israelis do as they pleased in the occupied territories for as long as they wanted. What he got in Trump after the 2016 election, however, is a wild card. Even with a Democrat in the White House, including one like Barack Obama who engaged on the Israeli-Palestinian issue from his first day in office, Netanyahu could rely on the traditional instruments of leverage in American politics – such as pro-Israel interest groups and a staunchly pro-Israel Congress – to help keep the president in check.

However, it is not clear if Trump, a nontraditional politician, is as susceptible to those pressures as his predecessors. Indeed, from what we have seen so far, Trump is not concerned about his political capital and is happy to change course abruptly on major initiatives. He is short-tempered and not necessarily wedded to any policy, even key campaign promises, and he does not care if he

alienates Congress in the process. This is a significant break from the patience and caution previous presidents have demonstrated when engaging on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and it should understandably cause concern for Netanyahu.

Israeli Blackmail

Trump has made clear he wants a deal, and Netanyahu has made clear he does not. While the Palestinian position on an acceptable two-state outcome has not changed over the years, the Israeli demands, largely shifted by Netanyahu, continue to change. After Palestinians conceded to the Israeli demand to recognize Israel without a reciprocal Israeli recognition of a Palestinian right to self-determination, the Israelis, under Netanyahu’s charge, demanded an additional step: Palestinian recognition of Israel “as a Jewish state.” Now Netanyahu further demands perpetual security control over large swaths of the West Bank. He has also manufactured many wrenches to throw in the works of the peace process.

When Obama took Iran off the international agenda with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, refocusing the relationship with Israel on the peace process, Netanyahu elevated the “incitement” demand. With this he insisted that Palestinians end what he deemed “incitement” speech and actions against Israeli society before there could be serious talks. But this tactic proved to be more of an excuse than an actual goal, since a trilateral mechanism to address incitement concerns on both sides existed but

the Israelis refused to reopen it. Instead, the incitement demand provided talking points and headlines in an effort to shift the conversation away from steps Israel should take, like freezing settlement building, to steps the Palestinians should take.

Today we are seeing a new episode in Netanyahu's time-wasting tactics: the demand that the Palestinian Authority cease providing stipends to the families of Palestinians killed or imprisoned by Israel. The Israelis call this "paying terrorists," which serves the sound-bite purpose in an effort to shift blame—thus not addressing any Palestinian demands or international obligations. Meanwhile, Israel continues to expand settlements despite the fact that a settlement freeze was a first phase Israeli obligation under the 2002 Road Map for Peace. Of course, settlement building continues to be a violation of international law.

The demand to end stipends to the families of prisoners is particularly unrealistic given Abbas's position and the importance of the prisoner issue in Palestinian society. Today, nearly 1,000 Palestinian prisoners are on a hunger strike in Israeli jails demanding better treatment and their effort has received wide praise and support across the Palestinian and Arab social and political spectrums. Further, in 2014, Abbas elevated the importance of the prisoner issue when he agreed to put the Palestinian campaign for international recognition in global organizations on hold, despite domestic disapproval of this decision, so that then-Secretary Kerry could re-engage

with the Israelis to work out a framework agreement.

Abbas agreed to this, over the objection of a majority of the PLO executive committee, on the condition that the Israelis release 104 long-held Palestinian prisoners. The Israelis agreed in a deal brokered by Kerry, but failed to follow through on the final transfer, collapsing the framework effort. By making this deal at the time, Abbas sent a symbolic message to his public; the only thing worth putting the statehood drive on hold for is our political prisoners. For these reasons, the Israeli demand that Abbas effectively punish the families of prisoners at this moment is the most impossible of asks. That is likely why the Israelis have chosen to make it.

Netanyahu has been adept at using various excuses to draw out or put off a process as he continues to expand settlements on expropriated Palestinian land. He likely needs to do this because if his coalition is actually confronted with having to make a choice about the future of the occupied territories, it would fall apart. Recently, Israel's Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan said Netanyahu and every minister in the security cabinet, a subset of key players in the government, "oppose a Palestinian state."

Netanyahu's record of warm relations with American presidents is unfavorable. His distract-and-delay approach has frustrated and angered both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, his counterparts over the years. Nevertheless, it has resulted in him outlasting them. Could he play the same risky game with Trump?

Trump may well realize that Netanyahu is not interested in a deal and is simply wasting his time. Few things will irritate a business-minded leader more than a negotiator who does not genuinely want a deal. But as we have seen over the years, the US-Israel relationship is about much more than the two individuals at the top. Years of thick bureaucratic ties have developed to ensure that even if a president like Obama and a prime minister like Netanyahu do not get along personally, they can still work out the largest US military aid package in history. So, while Trump may tire of Netanyahu's tactics, this will not imperil the US-Israel relationship – but it may well lead Trump to giving up on the Middle East peace effort altogether.

For Netanyahu, this is not the optimal outcome, although it would afford him the ability to continue putting off the choices needed to make peace. At the same time, it will demonstrate to the world that even with Trump, Netanyahu is not interested in peace, further turning Israel into a pariah state internationally.

The Price of Waiting for Trump

Abbas may be wise to Netanyahu's intentions and may be hoping that if he could just get Trump to see what sort of bad-faith negotiator the Israeli prime minister really is, Netanyahu would be exposed. This may be the only thing

that explains Abbas's strong statements of optimism, despite the fact that the actual prospects for a Washington-brokered two-state solution are more remote than ever before. But it may also be the only card he has to play while in a very disadvantageous position.

This situation is arguably in large part one of Abbas's own making, however. Recent polling of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza showed that only 25 percent of respondents believed their leadership was doing all it can to end the occupation, 64 percent want Abbas to resign, and 77 percent are dissatisfied with the leadership's response to new Israeli settlement plans. But Abbas has invested heavily in a Washington-mediated process that has only resulted in a cover for Israel's settlement building.

As his public continues to see this, Abbas is in danger of losing legitimacy and, in turn, may lean more heavily on a repressive security apparatus to stabilize his hold on power. That security apparatus, however, relies on a budget that is heavily subsidized by western donor countries, including the United States. This catch-22 propels a downward spiral which is leading the Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority into increasingly precarious territory.

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