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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Abbas-Trump Summit: More Unfounded Optimism

Policy Analysis Unit | May 2017

Abbas Pays Trump a Visit: More Unfounded Optimism

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Introduction

The White House received the Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on Wednesday, 3 May. The visit by the leader of the PNA fits into Washington's new broader approach to stem the tide of Iranian influence in the Middle East while simultaneously fighting ISIL. For the Trump administration--or at the very least, a faction within it--achieving a durable Israeli-Palestinian peace is one way of furthering these two aims.

Palestinian Obligations: A One-Way Street

Official summaries of the bilateral meeting make reference to an end to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and "partnership" between the US, the Israelis and the Palestinians, covering specific issues like training and equipping Palestinian security forces. An official statement published by the White House also emphasizes the need for security coordination between the PNA and the Israeli occupation forces in the West Bank¹. While a series of rigid obligations imposed on the Palestinians could be found throughout official statements from the White House, not a single reference was made to what the Israelis should do. In a joint statement with Abbas, Trump could be heard echoing the cry that "there cannot be lasting peace unless the Palestinian leaders speak in a unified voice against incitement to violate -- and violence and hate". Again, there was no expectation that Israel would reciprocate².

Earlier, Trump had also demanded that the PNA "resolve the issue" of pension payments made to the families of Palestinians detained by Israel³. Some Republican Senators have even begun demanding the imposition of US financial sanctions on the PNA until such pension payments are ended. They operate in the knowledge that the PNA is totally dependent on foreign

¹ "Readout of the Meeting between President Donald J. Trump and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 03, 2017, at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/03/readout-meeting-between-president-donald-j-trump-and-president-mahmoud>

² "Remarks by President Trump and President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority in Joint Statement, The White House Press House, May 3, 2017, available online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/03/remarks-president-trump-and-president-abbas-palestinian-authority-joint>

³ "Readout of the Meeting between President Donald J. Trump and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority"

financial support. The Palestinian leadership adheres to the existing authority under occupation and is total dependent on external funding and US managerial support to maintain the status quo, and hands over full leadership to the US-led "peace process"

President Abbas' response was to mollify concerns in the White House by insisting that the Palestinians "are raising [their] youth ... children ... grandchildren on a culture of peace. And we are endeavoring to bring about security, freedom and peace for our children to live like the other children in the world, along with the Israeli children in peace, freedom and security"⁴.

The Two-State Solution: Nowhere to be Found

President Abbas repeatedly made reference to "the Two-State Solution" throughout the press conference he shared with Trump, affirming the need for a Palestinian state to arise on territories which Israel occupied after the June, 1967 war—including East Jerusalem as the capital. In contrast, Trump made no mention of the "Two-State Solution" in any of the official statements released by the White House. Furthermore, the US side declined to make any mention of the settlements during the meetings. A UN Security Council Resolution (2334) passed in December, 2016, affirmed that these settlements were a violation of international law--at the time, then president-elect Trump had decried the Obama Administration's (unusual) refusal to veto UNSC 2334 at the Security Council.

To date, the Trump Administration has repeatedly hinted that it is prepared to break with decades of White House policy—including both Republican and Democrat administrations—in no longer supporting the Two-State Solution. Previous US administrations have always declined to spell out what the borders of a future Palestinian state should be--insisting instead that that would be decided by mutual negotiation between the Palestinians and Israelis. Yet this new course, corroborated by a senior White House aide prior to an earlier meeting between Trump and Israeli premier Netanyahu, is nonetheless a significant turn in US policy⁵. The same change of tone applies to the US treatment of Israeli settlements. Although Trump had earlier asked Netanyahu to "hold off" on settlements, "for a bit", the new Administration has also repeatedly

⁴ "Remarks by President Trump and President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority in Joint Statement"

⁵ Tracy Wilkinson and Alexandra Zavis, "White House backs away from two-state solution in Israeli-Palestinian conflict," Los Angeles Times, February 14, 2017, at:

<http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-israel-two-state-20170214-story.html>

claimed that the existence of Israeli settlements on the West Bank, while “unhelpful”, do not necessarily represent an obstacle to peace⁶.

The Trump Approach

Although President Trump casts himself as the international figure most capable of solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he has yet to formulate a coherent, clear political plan to actually carry that out. His refusal to condone a Two-State solution merely compounds the confusion on this point. Trump has said that he will “do whatever is necessary” to bring about peace in the Middle East. Yet in the same breath, he stood back to say that no third party can impose a solution on the Israelis and Palestinians, be it the United States, or anybody else. Instead, Trump wants to relegate the United States to the role of “mediator” or “peace broker”, and never offer a mechanism for the implementation of international law in such a way that will allow for the birth of a Palestinian state.

Nonetheless, it is clear that some within the Trump camp believe that executing an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal could form a pillar to a wider regional strategy, one aimed at tackling the twin foes of both Iran and Islamic extremism⁷. Seen from this angle, the Trump Administration may want to offer two-pronged incentives for the whole region. At one end, it is possible that Washington will hold out the promise of diplomatic normalization between Israel and the Arab Gulf states and what has often been called the “moderate” Arab camp. In parallel, the Trump Administration is likely to offer a carrot to its “moderate” Arab allies, acceding to greater American involvement in the Middle East. Specifically, Washington would help its Arab allies contain Iranian influence as well as limiting terrorism. In such a climate, Israel may be encouraged to offer greater concessions to the Palestinians. These concessions would ultimately afford the “Arab Moderate” camp the kind of public legitimacy it sorely needed to

⁶ Julian Borger and Peter Beaumont, “US: Israeli settlements no impediment to peace but may not be helpful,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2017, at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/03/trump-says-israeli-settlements-not-impediment-to-peace-but-expansion-unhelpful>

⁷ Ian Fisher and Ben Hubbard, “Trump’s Shift to ‘Outside-In’ Strategy for Mideast Peace Is a Long Shot,” *The New York Times*, February 14, 2017, at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/14/world/middleeast/israel-palestinians-donald-trump.html>

take its reconciliation with Israel further, perhaps even to the level of an alliance with the Zionist state.

If successful, this “Trump Approach” to the Middle East will afford the PNA the kind of diplomatic and political cover—and the prospect of financing from the Gulf states—which they would need to make some final concessions of their own⁸. The cheerleaders of this approach in the Middle East have yet to explain what is left for the Palestinians to give away. Indeed, for the Israelis, the Trump Approach offers an entirely different vantage point. For Tel Aviv, the prospect of an Israeli-Arab alliance, under American aegis, could be the justification they want for the final marginalization of the Palestinian cause, which will no longer be the stumbling block for Arab-Israeli normalization.

Conclusion

Many observers are skeptical of the Trump Administration’s ability to carry out what a string of previous administrations have so far failed to. These doubts are based on the current White House’s lack of will to bring about Israeli-Palestinian peace or a credible plan to do so. Furthermore, the team entrusted by the president to bring about peace in the Middle East, led by Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner and his former real estate attorney and present envoy to the region, Jason Greenblatt, is as ignorant as Trump is when it comes to the intricacies of the conflict. Together with the current US Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, Kushner and Greenblatt are staunch Israel loyalists operating within Washington. In light of all this, Abbas’ optimism about the ability of the US President to bring about a “historic” peace agreement in Palestine seems woefully misplaced. Ironically, one of the few people to echo Abbas’ optimism is White House Spokesman Sean Spicer. When asked about Trump’s chances of ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, he said: “The relationships and the foundation that the President is rebuilding are going to pay huge dividends for this country in terms of our economic interest, our national security interest. But this President’s style is one to develop a personal bond with individuals”⁹.

⁸ [Hussein Ibish](#), “Trump Just Got Palestinians’ Hopes Up,” *The Atlantic*, May 4, 2017, at:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/trump-abbas-palestinians/525441/>

⁹ “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Sean Spicer,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 03, 2017, at:

Some Palestinian officials justify Abbas' new-found optimism in the fact that Trump treats the Palestinian conflict as a national priority in Washington, recognizing its vital importance to US national security interests. Some even stated that the new President is "not in anyone's pocket"—in other words, that he is free of influence from domestic lobby groups answerable to Israel. Leaving aside this suggestion, which Palestinian officials themselves may not necessarily believe, it is possible that Abbas and the PNA are banking on Trump's outsized narcissism. With a belief in his own exceptional, unique skills honed in the world of business and finance, Trump may be inspired to achieve a thus far elusive peace between the Israelis and Palestinians.

Ultimately, Trump may indeed bring about a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, but it would likely come at the expense of the Palestinians. To date, officials in the Trump Administration insist that the president remains committed to moving the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem¹⁰. Given Trump's unwillingness to mention a Palestinian state or to speak out clearly against the settlements, and the wording of the statement from his meeting with Abbas which focused on "economic peace" and fighting terrorism, it is unlikely that Trump will provide the deliverance which the PNA needs.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/03/press-briefing-press-secretary-sean-spicer-532017-44>

¹⁰ Madeline Conway, "Pence: Trump considering moving U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem," Politico, May 2, 2017, at:

<http://www.politico.com/story/2017/05/02/pence-trump-israel-jerusalem-237894>