

The White House Peace Plan Meeting: U.S. Goals, Israeli Repercussions

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Brief Analysis

Whether they reveal a detailed plan or merely preview an aspirational document, U.S. officials still need to clarify their goals at a time when elections are looming and Palestinian participation seems highly unlikely.

In a dramatic move, President Trump has announced that Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and his leading rival, Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz, will visit the White House on January 28 to be briefed on the administration's long-awaited Middle East peace plan. Trump told reporters that the plan would likely be released before the summit. Predictably, no invitation was extended to the Palestinian Authority, which severed relations with Washington after the U.S. embassy was moved to Jerusalem in 2017. (A fuller discussion of Palestinian reactions to the meeting will be covered in a subsequent PolicyWatch.)

WHY NOW?

It is difficult to ignore the fact that the White House scheduled the summit for the very same day that Israel's Knesset is slated to begin deliberations over whether to grant Netanyahu immunity from **prosecution on corruption indictments** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/round-three-in-israel-domestic-dynamics-and-foreign-policy-implications>) until after he leaves office. Blue White officials have spearheaded parliamentary efforts on the matter so far, seemingly dooming the prospect of immunity. Accordingly, the Israeli public is coming to grips with the idea that if Netanyahu wins the unprecedented third-round election on March 2, he will be running the country while going to court at the same time. Given his well-known intimacy with Trump, there is widespread speculation that Netanyahu asked for the meeting in order to distract from the Knesset proceeding. Notably, the summit will also take place in the middle of Trump's impeachment trial.

Shifting the focus of the March election from immunity to the U.S. peace plan is a sharp turn for Netanyahu. Until now, he has made the case that releasing the Trump plan during an election campaign would be disastrous because it risks fracturing his right-wing base. Indeed, immediately after Washington's announcement, Netanyahu's far-right rival Defense Minister Naftali Bennett issued a statement declaring that his Yamina (Rightward) party opposes giving up any more land for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Although the Trump plan is expected to fall considerably short of Palestinian expectations on that front, it would likely yield the majority of the West Bank to them over time, including Area C and large parts of Areas A (Palestinian urban control) and B (where Palestinians have control over public safety, but Israel has overriding authority).

Yet the timing suggests that Netanyahu has been rattled by the prospect of losing immunity and is willing to risk a right-wing fight. He is probably confident that he can navigate public expectations about the Trump plan—for example, he may indicate that he has some reservations about its specific territorial provisions while simultaneously emphasizing that it is closer to Israel's requirements than any previous U.S. peace initiative. Netanyahu apparently believes that conservative Israeli pundits are focusing more on the plan's historic nature rather than its potential territorial delineations, since in their view, the proposals are virtually certain to be rejected by the Palestinians anyway. In that sense, it will be important to note whether the White House issues a map now or waits until after Israel's election, since such details are likely to inflame at least some portions of Netanyahu's base.

WHAT DOES THE ADMINISTRATION WANT TO ACHIEVE?

In the most immediate sense, U.S. officials insist that inviting both Netanyahu and Gantz neutralizes the allegation that Washington is interfering in Israeli domestic politics. They also note that this third round of elections is hardly guaranteed to break the impasse seen last April and September, so they might as well act now. Yet these arguments assume that the two candidates will respond to the peace plan in similar fashion. Alternatively, some might argue that Netanyahu and Trump are prioritizing their potential electoral advantages even if it threatens the viability of a negotiated two-state solution.

These concerns, coupled with the realization that the PA is unlikely to end its boycott and suddenly engage in negotiations, lead to the most pressing question: what is the goal of the upcoming meeting and peace plan? Two potential explanations seem most feasible.

First, the administration may intend to release a "vision" that serves as a marker for future talks instead of a detailed plan. The president may see this approach as a way to establish a new reference point that shifts long-held U.S. positions on the core issues, thereby affecting all future initiatives. If Trump is reelected, the administration believes the PA would need to swallow its defiance and reconcile itself to this new political reality.

Alternatively, the administration may be counting on the PA to reject the plan outright. In this view, a hard Palestinian "no" could give Israel freedom of action to annex areas such as the Jordan Valley. The valley would likely fall under Israel's control in any Trump peace initiative, so releasing the plan's details now could provide Washington with a way to support such an Israeli move even before negotiations with the PA. On this point, Israel's handling of a similar situation—the dispute with Syria over the Golan Heights—may be instructive. Israel applied its own laws over that territory in 1981, but later came to the table to negotiate its status under successive governments in the 1990s, and under Netanyahu's leadership as well.

Whatever the case, PA rejection of the U.S. plan is a prerequisite for any Israeli annexation move, which may explain why one senior Arab leader has repeatedly urged President Mahmoud Abbas not to reject Trump's ideas outright, fearing the potential territorial consequences. Yet this advice does not seem to be gaining traction so far—PA spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh recently warned that the U.S. plan will cross Palestinian "redlines" if it fails to treat the pre-1967 boundaries as a baseline for Israeli withdrawals, raising the possibility that the Washington summit

might lead to violence in the territories.

Regarding Arab and European states, the administration has held quiet consultations with at least a few of them in advance of releasing the plan, though it may still reach out to them again before the meeting. Ideally, the administration hopes that Arab officials say there are elements of the plan worthy of further discussion, fully aware that such comments fall considerably short of support. Yet even this limited objective may not be achieved, and Arab leaders may instead choose to be silent or even openly critical if they deem the plan is imbalanced in favor of Israel. For example, Amman has reportedly threatened to suspend its peace treaty with Israel if Netanyahu annexes the Jordan Valley.

FUTURE OF THE SETTLEMENTS

Some have speculated that the Trump plan will yield around 80 percent of the West Bank to the Palestinians, with Israel annexing not just the main settlement blocs near the West Bank security barrier, but also some or all of the outlying settlements and the Jordan Valley. A key question is whether the sovereignty of the resultant Palestinian territory is described in purely aspirational terms or linked to specific Palestinian actions down the road.

Other potential options vary in their feasibility. A peace plan that leaves several dozen non-bloc settlements as separate enclaves outside the security barrier, still attached to Israel, but inside a Palestinian state would raise serious doubts about viability given the territorial contortions and number of settlers involved (over 100,000 people). Calling for the removal of outposts deemed illegal under Israeli law seems like a more feasible and welcome move. As for the Palestinians, the U.S. plan may intend to establish a capital for them by merging some of their outer neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. Yet declaring a Palestinian state would apparently come with prerequisites—namely, agreeing to demilitarization and accepting Israel’s identity as a Jewish state.

IS GANTZ BOXED IN?

It is unclear whether the Washington meeting will wind up politically constraining Gantz. The former military chief is believed to fear two possibilities in particular: (1) that the meeting will favor Netanyahu and allow him to divert attention from the immunity issue and his broader legal troubles; and (2) that Netanyahu will try to use the peace plan as a catalyst for either applying Israeli law to the Jordan Valley or annexing it outright. These concerns have led some to question whether he will cancel or postpone his visit, perhaps waiting until after the election instead. He is expected to announce his decision the night of January 25.

Although Gantz would be hard-pressed to refuse an invitation to the White House, he no doubt fears looking like a third wheel at the summit, since Netanyahu will probably use the media attention to claim that his personal relationship with Trump is what brought the peace plan so close to his vision. Gantz likely also fears being seen as falling to the left of a right-wing U.S. administration, since that could erode his support among the moderate right-of-center Israeli voters he has been courting so assiduously.

For now, Gantz appears to be preparing for the possibility of a two-step sequence wherein the U.S. plan spurs Netanyahu toward annexing the Jordan Valley. Earlier this week, he stated that he favors such annexation, but only in “coordination with the international community.” In contrast, fellow Blue White leader Yair Lapid has said that annexing the valley must wait until after successful negotiations with the Palestinians. It is important to the Trump administration that Israel take no active steps toward annexation at this time, at least until the PA authoritatively rejects the plan. In this sense, Abbas could play into Netanyahu’s hands at the expense of Gantz, depending on his reaction to the summit.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and creator of the new podcast [Decision Points: The U.S.-Israel Relationship \(https://shows.acast.com/decision-points\)](https://shows.acast.com/decision-points). ❖

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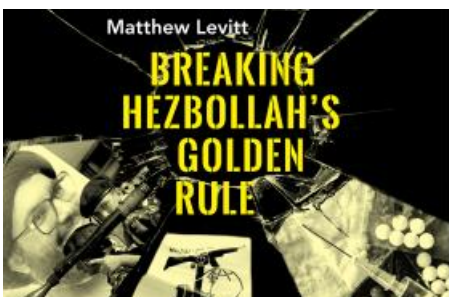
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