

# Don't Dismiss the Bahrain Conference. It Can Help Palestinians.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Emphasizing stabilization efforts now while at least mentioning Palestinian statehood just might give the Trump peace plan a chance later.

**W**hat will happen with U.S. President Donald Trump's "deal of the century"? It's a question everyone in Israel is asking these days: Some want to know what's in the Trump peace plan, others want to know if it will ever be unveiled, and still others are interested in whether it has any chance of success.

I make no claims to know what is in Trump advisors Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt's plan, and given that Israelis are going back to the polls on Sept. 17, the Trump administration may be less inclined to present it. After all, given the Jewish holidays at that time of year and the government formation process, the next Israeli government may not emerge until November. At that point, the U.S. electoral calendar will kick in; because the plan's architects have consistently said that Israelis (and Palestinians) will like parts of the plan and dislike other parts, Trump runs the risk that Israelis will criticize what they don't like in the plan. Will he present the plan knowing that? No one knows.

By November, the Trump administration will have worked on the plan for nearly three years. Kushner and Greenblatt are currently preparing for a workshop in Bahrain on June 25 and 26 to outline the economic component of their plan. Selling the economics of the plan won't be easy, however, given the Trump administration's approach that, until now, has seemingly ignored Palestinian needs.

It's true that when the administration was dealing with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and his representatives, they heard only slogans and stale talking points—and concluded that Palestinians needed to adjust their expectations and behavior. Maximum pressure, the defining tactic of this administration in negotiations, has been applied to the PA even as there has been a hope that the plan could appeal to a Palestinian public that wants to live a better, more normal life free of Israeli occupation.

The problem is that while pressuring the PA, the administration continually responded to the symbolic needs of Israel, cementing the impression among the Palestinian public that the White House was hostile to them and would not address Palestinian rights. The irony is that the Trump administration still could have taken many of the steps that appear to favor Israel without losing the Palestinian public.

For example, when declaring Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the White House could have said that it also recognized that the Palestinians have needs and claims in East Jerusalem that can only be resolved through negotiations—and that is why it did not recognize the boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in the city. When zeroing out U.S. aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, administration officials could have simultaneously announced that the United States was reprogramming the over \$300 million for specific programs on food, health, sewage, and schools to address the needs of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. Even after recognizing Israeli sovereignty on the Golan Heights—a move that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu quickly seized on to justify possible annexations in the West Bank—Washington could have publicly opposed any unilateral Israeli annexations there.

The absence of any such moves, together with the unwillingness to acknowledge Palestinian statehood, makes Trump's desire to appeal to the Palestinian public over the head of Abbas largely futile. That does not mean the plans for Bahrain are hopeless—but it does mean the focus needs to be adjusted.

Rather than simply presenting what is possible over the next 10 years with infrastructure development and private sector investments, Kushner and Greenblatt should place the emphasis on a near-term stabilization plan for Gaza and the West Bank. The plan would address electricity, water, sewage, and job creation related to the truly terrible conditions in Gaza.

No one is going to invest even in these baseline needs without Hamas accepting a longer-term cease-fire. For real reconstruction over time, there could be phases in which the Hamas would start by ending the building of tunnels and rocket testing. The scope of reconstruction could be tied to the extent of demilitarization.

I have no illusions: Hamas will never give up all its weapons or resistance ideology. However, given the four days of widespread demonstrations against it in March—Gaza's residents protested the lack of jobs and housing while chanting, "We want to live"—Hamas has its own interest in accepting a longer-term cease-fire and at least the beginning of such a process.

This is especially true if it looks like Hamas can preside over an improvement of the basic conditions of life in Gaza. As for the West Bank, the Arab participants in Bahrain should be asked to help resolve the financial crisis in the PA—a crisis stemming from Abbas's refusal to accept the tax revenues Israel collects on its behalf because Israel is deducting from them the amount the PA pays the families of those who are in Israeli prisons for terrorist attacks against Israelis.

Abbas has asked Arab states to replace all the lost revenue. The Arab leaders should say they will happily replace what the Israelis deduct (which is roughly 6 percent of the total), but not the 94 percent that Israel is sending to PA bank accounts and the PA is returning. To sweeten the pot, they could add housing as well as road and water infrastructure projects.

Making stabilization the goal of the Bahrain workshop is necessary for two fundamental reasons. First, there is a real danger of a blowup in Gaza and the West Bank. Gaza flared up last November and last month—it is only a matter of time until there is another round of mass protests, and sooner or later Hamas will hit the wrong target, killing Israeli civilians and prompting a devastating Israeli retaliation that kills large numbers of Palestinians.

At that point, the conflict will escalate. In the West Bank, the PA security forces have received only partial salaries since February and may soon not be paid at all. Some are reportedly taking second jobs, and there are clear signs that many in the PA security forces are losing their motivation to perform their responsibilities. That can lead to

nowhere good.

Second, the Trump administration needs to show it can actually do something real and tangible for Palestinians. While stabilization is not a panacea, it just might make the public more willing to consider the political part of the U.S. plan. Of course, if Trump officials would say in Bahrain that the plan will provide for Palestinian statehood, it would debunk the argument that it is offering only economic peace designed to bribe the Palestinians into giving up their national aspirations. Such a declaration would also provide Arabs participating in Bahrain more political space to be responsive.

The Bahrain workshop could end up making a real contribution and even potentially lend credence to the broader Trump peace plan. Emphasizing stabilization now just might give the Trump plan a chance later.

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