

Resetting U.S. Relations with the Palestinian Authority?

by [Ghaith al-Omari \(/experts/ghaith-al-omari\)](/experts/ghaith-al-omari)

Mar 12, 2025

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ghaith al-Omari \(/experts/ghaith-al-omari\)](/experts/ghaith-al-omari)

Ghaith al-Omari is the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Irwin Levy Family Program on the U.S.-Israel Strategic Relationship.



Brief Analysis

After boycotting Trump in his first term, Ramallah now seeks to improve the relationship, giving Washington an opening to address the PA's shortcomings without distracting from other Middle East priorities.

Even before Donald Trump won last November, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas was taking steps to repair the damage caused by his decision to boycott Trump's first administration, from passing new reforms to conducting unprecedented West Bank security operations. Given Abbas's past behavior, however, these steps should be viewed with caution. The obstacles to bilateral progress are significant, whether because of Palestinian dynamics or U.S. policies. Nevertheless, Washington should engage with the PA to ascertain whether the recent changes are genuine—particularly since the PA's clear desire to be in Trump's good graces provides an opportunity to address some of its shortcomings without expending much U.S. political or material resources.

Mending Fences

Trump and Abbas began with warm relations during his first term. The two leaders met in Bethlehem in May 2017, then again at the White House in September. Yet this honeymoon came to an abrupt end on December 6, 2017, when Trump announced that the U.S. embassy in Israel would be moved to Jerusalem, drawing a harsh PA reaction. Over the following months, a series of developments resulted in the closure of diplomatic channels and a pause on U.S. aid.

Realizing the damage caused by the lack of contact in Trump's first term, Abbas attempted to mend fences during last year's U.S. election campaign. On July 14, for example, he sent Trump a letter condemning the assassination attempt against him. Since the election, the PA has taken a number of steps to revive the relationship and position itself to play a leading role in postwar Gaza. Late last year, it conducted rare security operations in the northern West Bank towns of Tubas and Jenin. On February 10, Abbas issued a decree to bring the PA into compliance with the 2017 Taylor Force Act. And during the March 4 Arab League summit, he announced a series of reforms in both the

American Complications

These measures, long overdue, were delayed by domestic Palestinian obstacles, which remain and are compounded by U.S. policies and positions. Nevertheless, the PA's attempts to make these changes indicate its eagerness to repair relations.

The PA's reaction to Trump's "Gaza Riviera" plan was relatively muted, as it took refuge in the collective Arab rejection, thereby avoiding a direct confrontation with Washington. However, as long as this idea remains on the table, the PA's engagement with the administration will leave it open to accusations of collusion. And if the plan is enacted, the PA might have no choice (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/when-riviera-meets-sumud-why-palestinian-realities-dont-mesh-trumps-gaza-plan>) but to cut off relations once again.

The Trump administration's recent direct negotiations with Hamas (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/short-lived-us-hamas-talks-are-cautionary-tale-washington-and-jerusalem>) represent a significant setback for the PA. Ramallah has long argued that Hamas's international isolation—due to espousing terrorism and refusing to recognize Israel—has made it unfit to lead the Palestinian people, since it cannot mobilize the world diplomatically or secure international financial assistance. In particular, the PA has argued that Hamas cannot be permitted to remain in power in Gaza because no donor country will invest in postwar reconstruction as long as the group is there. The direct U.S. talks, however, signal a crack in Hamas's isolation.

An End to "Pay for Slay"?

Perhaps the most striking recent step by the PA is reforming the payment system for prisoners and "martyrs." These payments have not only prevented the PA from receiving U.S. assistance under the Taylor Force Act, but also created a chilling effect on numerous aspects of U.S.-PA relations. The two governments have discussed abolishing these payments for many years, and toward the end of the Biden administration, a plan to do so took final shape: the PA would end the practice and transfer its former beneficiaries to the general Palestinian social welfare system, which is based solely on financial need. Yet Ramallah balked at officially adopting this policy for fear of the public's reaction.

In February, Abbas formalized these understandings in a decree that would ostensibly bring the PA into compliance with U.S. law. As part of reforming the entire PA social welfare system, the old system of prisoner payments was transferred to a new organization along with other social welfare payments.

It is not clear how genuine this change is, however. The new decree is vaguely worded and has not yet been put into practice. The Taylor Force Act requires rigorous, ongoing certification, reporting, and notification mechanisms to examine the application of the new arrangements and determine whether they meet U.S. legal requirements. If the PA does meet these requirements—which include additional provisions such as public condemnation of terrorist attacks—then Washington should reciprocate by resuming U.S. funding. While this will be challenging given the Trump administration's aversion to foreign assistance, even a small amount of support will send an important political signal, reenergizing bilateral relations and better positioning Washington to urge other donors to support the PA.

Is the PA Taking Security Seriously?

In another notable development, the PA security forces (PASF) recently started intensive operations in the northern West Bank, particularly Tubas and Jenin, which have long been hotbeds of instability and vividly testify to the PA's lack of control in areas under its jurisdiction. A number of factors contributed to the timing of these operations, including PA concerns about increasing local support for Hamas. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that discussions

about the “day after” in Gaza were a factor, as the PA wishes to signal that it can play a security role once the war is over.

These operations have had mixed results. On one hand, they signal the PA’s willingness to use force against terrorists, and some aspects were positive, such as coordination between PASF branches and the performance of certain units. On the other hand, the operations highlighted the PASF’s deficiencies in intelligence and capabilities, and the operation in Jenin did not achieve its objectives.

This new dynamic creates an opportunity to energize U.S.-PA security relations. As long as the PA keeps demonstrating the will to act, the United States has tools in place to support its efforts. Since the Office of the U.S. Security Coordinator was created in 2005, it has effectively helped reform and professionalize the PASF, and it advised Palestinian commanders during the recent operations. The USSC has also helped maintain Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation, even now when Israel’s West Bank operations are creating friction. Strengthening the USSC will help maintain channels of communication on security issues with the PA and improve its ability to maintain relative stability (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pa-reform-key-west-bank-stability-and-possible-rule-gaza>) in the West Bank, without additional costs for Washington.

PA Reform at Last?

The PA now seems to realize that it must reform itself in order to play a role not only in Gaza, but also in wider regional and international diplomacy. The Biden administration’s call for a “rejuvenated PA” rang alarm bells in Ramallah, which attempted to appear responsive by appointing a new prime minister but took no steps to devolve power from Abbas.

While the Trump administration has not directly addressed PA reform, Trump’s “Gaza Riviera” comments generated a sense of urgency in Arab capitals to present an alternative plan (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-arab-summits-hold-key-viable-gaza-plan>), in turn upping the pressure on Abbas to undertake genuine reform and make the PA a credible alternative to Hamas. In private conversations with Abbas, some regional leaders pressed him on reform. To punctuate the point, Abbas was not invited to the meeting that Saudi Arabia organized to discuss an Arab response to Trump’s proposal. Hence it was no surprise when Abbas chose the subsequent emergency Arab League summit to announce that he will appoint a deputy and pardon those expelled from Fatah—two politically significant moves.

PA reform will ultimately benefit U.S. interests, providing a Palestinian alternative to Hamas and maintaining West Bank stability. At the same time, such reform is a painstaking, complex process. The Trump administration is unlikely to involve itself directly in the details of genuine PA reform, but the newfound desire of Arab states to see such reform creates an opportunity for Washington to advance this goal through its partners. Arab states seek to change certain aspects of U.S. policy on the Palestinian issue. By linking such changes to Arab promotion of PA reform, the administration can advance this agenda without expending inordinate political and diplomatic capital.

Conclusion

Given the magnitude and complexity of the issues facing the Trump administration in the Middle East, it is unlikely to prioritize building relations with Ramallah. Yet recent PA actions and announcements signal a desire to reach out to Washington. The United States can garner significant benefits from these overtures without diverting attention and resources from other regional priorities.

Ghaith al-Omari is the Gilbert Foundation Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and a former advisor to the Palestinian Authority. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Enough with the Hand-Wringing: Al-Sharaa Is Better Than Assad

Mar 11, 2025



David Schenker

(/policy-analysis/enough-hand-wringing-al-sharaa-better-assad)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

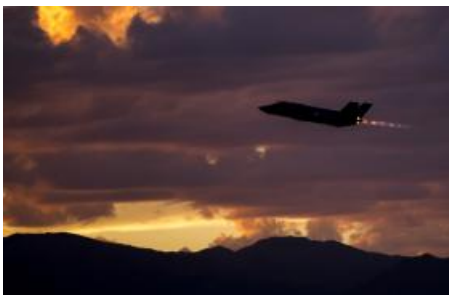
Short-Lived U.S.-Hamas Talks Are a Cautionary Tale for Washington and Jerusalem

Mar 11, 2025



David Makovsky

(/policy-analysis/short-lived-us-hamas-talks-are-cautionary-tale-washington-and-jerusalem)



IN-DEPTH REPORTS

Attacking Iran's Nuclear Program:

The Complex Calculus of Preventive Action

Mar 11, 2025



Michael Eisenstadt

(/policy-analysis/attacking-irans-nuclear-program-complex-calculus-preventive-action)

TOPICS

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)