

So Much Winning: Why Mahmoud Abbas Thinks He's Beating Trump—and Israel

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Oct 14, 2018

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Articles & Testimony

He's 83, with no successor and no state, but he still seems to believe that defiance is a worthwhile end in of itself.

For Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, the U.S. and Israel are two countries using political and economic leverage to force him to accept policies that he finds objectionable—or else risk being completely marginalized. Yet, Abbas believes that he has so far withstood at least three key challenges presented by the U.S. and Israel in recent months, and thus he believes he is scoring political victories. He may not be bringing his people an inch closer to statehood or bringing them major benefits, but he sees himself as a political survivor. Leading a movement that historically has been about defiance, he sees survival as its own reward.

While American efforts—and its policy of pressure—could still yield success on the Palestinian front in resuming meaningful negotiations in the next two years, it is important to see how Abbas sees the Trump Administration, almost at its halfway point. Whether one likes Abbas or not, it is important to see how he is likely to think he is winning when it comes to issues of the last few months.

In looking at his scorecard, it is worth starting with the United Nations. U.S. ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley, who has just [announced \(https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/nikki-haley-reportedly-resigns-as-u-s-ambassador-to-un-1.6545897\)](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/nikki-haley-reportedly-resigns-as-u-s-ambassador-to-un-1.6545897) her retirement, led the charge of the Trump Administration to put forward a tough position on the issues of refugees and aid to the Palestinians. That stance is popular among many Americans who question whether the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) is really seeking to solve the Palestinian refugee issue, but rather [seeks to perpetuate it \(https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-care-about-palestinian-refugees-this-is-why-you-should-back-trump-s-aid-cut-1.6533096\)](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-care-about-palestinian-refugees-this-is-why-you-should-back-trump-s-aid-cut-1.6533096).

However, by not putting forward an *alternative* U.S. plan for Palestinian humanitarian assistance focused on bona

fide American non-governmental aid groups, while withholding [all \(https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/trump-administration-to-cut-200-million-from-palestinian-aid-1.6412298\)](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/trump-administration-to-cut-200-million-from-palestinian-aid-1.6412298) American aid [\(https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/trump-administration-to-cut-200-million-from-palestinian-aid-1.6412298\)](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/trump-administration-to-cut-200-million-from-palestinian-aid-1.6412298) to the Palestinian Authority, it has made it easier for Europeans and Arabs states to galvanize enthusiasm and support for UNRWA. This was exacerbated by concerns that Palestinian kids in the West Bank and Gaza will not be able to go to school this fall. Two rounds of emergency appeals, including one at the time of the opening of the UN General Assembly, equaling \$320 million in pledges for 2018, has covered the deficit that UNRWA has faced, according to UN officials.

Of course, the test will be: Will these countries sustain these levels over the years to come? One senior non-American diplomat confidently declared to me, “The U.S. [withholding of funding from UNRWA \(https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-trump-administration-announces-end-to-financial-aid-for-unrwa-1.6433942\)](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-trump-administration-announces-end-to-financial-aid-for-unrwa-1.6433942) has created a new international equilibrium as other countries have stepped in. UNRWA has not been crippled and the U.S. has been marginalized” within the organization.

The U.S. hope was that its withdrawal of funds would lead to a [shift \(https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-amid-tensions-with-abbas-white-house-says-unrwa-mandate-must-change-1.6343237\)](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-amid-tensions-with-abbas-white-house-says-unrwa-mandate-must-change-1.6343237) in UNRWA’s policy, not least its definition of refugees, but this does not seem to be the case. Likewise, the U.S. hope that this would [pressure Abbas \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-trump-we-cut-funding-to-palestinians-to-pressure-them-to-negotiate-1.6462792\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-trump-we-cut-funding-to-palestinians-to-pressure-them-to-negotiate-1.6462792) to change his “no contact” stance vis a vis the Trump administration has not been borne out either. The U.S. has legitimate reasons to stop funding UNRWA, but the bottom line is Abbas seems poised to continue to use UNRWA as a political cudgel, at least for now.

Another development that Abbas must favor is President Donald Trump’s recent declaration in which he said for the first time that he [favors the two-state solution \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-trump-expected-to-discuss-russia-crisis-at-un-general-assembly-1.6510856\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-trump-expected-to-discuss-russia-crisis-at-un-general-assembly-1.6510856), after famously [refusing \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/LIVE-trump-declines-to-endorse-two-state-solution-calls-on-netanyahu-to-hold-back-on-settlements-1.5435415\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/LIVE-trump-declines-to-endorse-two-state-solution-calls-on-netanyahu-to-hold-back-on-settlements-1.5435415) to publicly endorse the two-state approach since the start of his administration.

Over the first year of the Trump Administration, Palestinian officials say that Abbas was concerned that the U.S. would cajole Gulf states like Saudi Arabia into pressuring him to accept Trump’s peace deal. Those Gulf states may not much like or respect Abbas—due to an array of grievances with Abbas personally (including long-standing Emirati anger over Abbas’s feud with [Mohammed Dahlan \(https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-the-dahlan-plan-without-hamas-and-without-abbas-1.5489509\)](https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-the-dahlan-plan-without-hamas-and-without-abbas-1.5489509))—and subsequently have not been generous donors to the Palestinian Authority. However, that pressure has simply not materialized—and Abbas has breathed a sigh of relief.

Ever since the [visit \(https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/trump-welcomes-mbs-saudi-arabia-is-a-very-wealthy-1.5932205\)](https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/trump-welcomes-mbs-saudi-arabia-is-a-very-wealthy-1.5932205) of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) to the White House in the spring of this year, the once-fashionable term “outside-in” has lost its shine. That idea, that parties outside the immediate Israeli-Palestinian circle can [facilitate Arab backing \(https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-how-kushner-played-matchmaker-between-israel-and-saudi-arabia-1.6467657\)](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-how-kushner-played-matchmaker-between-israel-and-saudi-arabia-1.6467657) for a Trump peace plan or even pre-empt them with innovative [bilateral ties \(https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians-should-shut-up-or-make-peace-said-saudi-crown-prince-1.6036624\)](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians-should-shut-up-or-make-peace-said-saudi-crown-prince-1.6036624), has been gradually nixed, as MBS has made it clear that the U.S. cannot count on the Saudis to twist the arms of the Palestinians. This may have been the case even if the U.S. had not moved its embassy to Jerusalem, but certainly Arab officials point to this as a complicating factor.

Two elements likely to reinforce this dropping of outside Arab pressure on the PA are the cooling of Saudi-U.S.

relations, indicated not least by a public statement by Trump at a rally to his supporters recently that the Kingdom **could not survive two weeks (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/trump-i-told-saudi-king-he-wouldn-t-last-for-two-weeks-without-u-s-backing-1.6517717>)** without the U.S., as well as the recent crisis surrounding the **disappearance (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/turkey/.premium-ex-u-s-officials-trump-s-saudi-policy-lets-mbs-think-he-can-get-away-with-murde-1.6534778>)** and apparent murder of Saudi journalist **Jamal Khashoggi (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-turkey-jailer-of-journalists-will-now-slam-saudi-arabia-for-killing-a-journalist-1.6534955>)**.

A third area where Abbas feels success is that he has paid no political price for his indifference to the misery in Gaza. Not only has he not been involved in securing Qatari funding to increase electricity for Gazans, from four to eight hours per day until the end of 2018, he has opposed it. He has cut PA aid to Gaza.

His strategy has been clear: Make the situation in Gaza more severe in order to press Hamas into a military confrontation with Israel, which would break the impasse. This would yield dual benefits. It would militarily weaken his rival, Hamas. And it would allow Abbas to continue to do what he loves, namely, publicly blaming Israel as the victimizer. Blaming Israel as the bully is what enables Abbas to reinforce the Palestinian narrative in Europe as the victim. It is a cynical move, but it has worked.

Abbas has not only *not* paid a price for his indifference to Gaza, but he has done so while snubbing Egyptian mediation and attempts to find a way for the Palestinian Authority to return to Gaza. For Abbas, Gaza is a trap. In his view, unless Hamas surrenders its guns, he has the authority and they have the responsibility to improve the miserable living conditions in Gaza. That understandable position on Hamas disarmament, however, should be met with a concrete plan by Egypt regarding how to achieve an objective, but this has not been the case.

So whether the issue is UNRWA, the Arabs and Trump, or Gaza, Abbas believes he has avoided paying political costs in defying the U.S, even if the U.S. has indeed cut economic aid. Of course, his political maneuverings have not necessarily helped the Palestinian people. The two-state outcome seems far off. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition still builds beyond the security barrier. Moreover, succession for the 83-year-old Abbas is murkier than ever.

A common thread between the controversies relating to UNRWA, the role of Arab states and the status of Gaza is that Abbas measures successes by what did not happen—namely, by his ability to maintain the situation in these distinct arenas in a bid to foil the U.S. Sadly, in the Mideast, political survival and success are too often conflated with strategic gains. The two are not the same. In the twilight of his life, Abbas has no illusions that he is on the cusp of strategic success, and therefore consoles himself with these acts of non-cooperation. But even as the head of a movement whose very self-definition over many decades is inextricably tied to the idea of defiance of outside powers, this organizing principle has so far proven to be an insufficient catalyst to move closer to the goal of statehood.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and helped created its interactive mapping tool 'Settlements and Solutions: Is It Too Late for Two States?'

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/settlements-and-solutions> " ❖

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