

Trump's Policy Toward the Palestinians Is Dazed and Confused—and Dangerous for Israel

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Articles & Testimony

The administration's actions appear to contradict its statements about preserving the two-state solution, negotiating core issues like Jerusalem, facilitating PA economic growth, and pressuring Israeli leaders.

Donald Trump has declared (diplomatic) war against the Palestinians. The latest in a long series of punitive sanctions took place last Monday, when the U.S. administration announced the shuttering of the Palestine Liberation Organization representative office in Washington, effectively the Palestinian embassy to the U.S., which had been open since 1994.

This came after cutting off of all U.S. funding to the hospital network in East Jerusalem late last week, to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)—the body responsible for Palestinian refugees—the week prior, and to USAID development and infrastructure projects in the Palestinian Territories the week before that. Combined with the move of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May and the recognition of the contested city as Israel's capital last December, the U.S.-Palestinian relationship is arguably at a nadir not seen in at least three decades.

This has not stopped Trump officials from touting, implausibly, that they are still “very much committed” to brokering an Israeli-Palestinian peace. Yet as Aaron David Miller, a veteran U.S. diplomat and peace negotiator, recently [put it \(https://twitter.com/aarondmiller2/status/1038593410213527553\)](https://twitter.com/aarondmiller2/status/1038593410213527553), “In 40 years following U.S. policy in and outside government [I have] never seen any administration simultaneously support Israel so uncritically and go after Palestinians so harshly—both without logic, purpose or national security rationale.”

It wasn't always thus. To hear Palestinians officials tell it, their relationship with Trump has gone through three distinct phases over the last 22 months, not all of them negative.

The first phase, beginning with Trump's election in November 2016 until approximately February 2017, was in fact marked by silence. As Husam Zomlot, the Palestinian ambassador to the U.S., told foreign reporters in the West Bank

recently, “We didn’t hear anything [from the incoming/new administration], there was no communication” between the two sides. Sources in both Ramallah and Washington confirmed this to me at the time, with the Palestinians only belatedly appreciating that Trump would be a very different proposition from previous presidents.

“[The Palestinians] were shocked to hear that the new administration was serious [about moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem],” Khalil Shikaki, director of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, told me then. “They underestimated the potential for change with the new administration—this is their ‘awakening’ and they are not prepared.” During this phase, too, Trump raised concerns about what was to come by not committing to long-standing U.S. policy in support of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Eventually both the Palestinian and American leaderships did engage with each other, beginning the second phase—and arguably the high-water mark—of the relationship, from about March to November 2017. Trump and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas spoke on the phone for the first time in March, with Abbas visiting the White House and Trump reciprocating with a trip to Bethlehem in May. The two leaders met again in September on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meetings in New York.

Throughout, the U.S. president maintained that he was committed to helping Israelis and Palestinians reach what he often referred to as the “ultimate deal.” More to the point, Trump praised Abbas during these meetings as a real partner in peace. “We must continue to build our partnership with the Palestinian security forces to counter and defeat terrorism,” **Trump stated at the White House meeting with Abbas (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-abbas-palestinian-authority-joint-statement/>)**. “I also applaud the Palestinian Authority’s continued security coordination with Israel...I was actually impressed and somewhat surprised at how well they get along. They work together beautifully.”

By the Palestinian count, their diplomatic envoys met with the small U.S. “peace team”—headed by Jared Kushner—thirty-five times during this period. Yet as Zomlot explained, “All we heard [during these meetings] is ‘we want to make peace’—there were no substantial ideas, only promises.”

The third phase, and crisis period, began in November 2017, with media reports that the U.S. would be closing the PLO office in Washington; this ultimately did not come to pass (at least not then). But in December, Trump, on relatively short notice, gave the speech recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and stated his intention to relocate the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv.

A senior Palestinian delegation that traveled to the White House was apparently informed mere days in advance. In explaining the move, Trump seemed to be animated more by domestic political considerations than any larger diplomatic vision: other presidents had promised to take this controversial step on the campaign trail only to renege once in office (“some say they lacked courage,” Trump averred).

American assurances that the final borders of the holy city would only be set after negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians fell on deaf ears. Trump himself in subsequent months **stated repeatedly (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-netanyahu-trump-meeting-in-davos/>)** that he had “taken Jerusalem off the table” as a negotiating issue, further muddying things and alarming Palestinians who claim the city’s eastern half as their future capital. (As one senior Palestinian official asked me earlier this year: “Do you know what he meant by this?”)

After December, Abbas and the Palestinian leadership cut diplomatic ties with most of the Trump administration, refusing to meet with the peace team. Relations only went downhill from there.

Trump, via Twitter, blasted the Palestinians for showing no “appreciation or respect” for the hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. aid they received, seemingly forgetting all his remarks from the previous year. Abbas, in turn, **called the Jerusalem speech the “slap of the century” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/14/world/middleeast/abbas->**

[palestinians-trump.html](#)) and shrugged off the threat of a cut-off in aid.

Worse still, the diplomatic spat took on increasingly personal tones, with American and Palestinian officials [exchanging direct barbs \(https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-with-talks-frozen-u-s-and-palestinian-envoys-trade-barbs-in-haaretz-1.6162948\)](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-with-talks-frozen-u-s-and-palestinian-envoys-trade-barbs-in-haaretz-1.6162948) through public remarks and dueling op-eds. “May your house be destroyed,” Abbas slammed Trump during a speech, an Arabic phrase essentially meaning “damn you.”

Yet for all the threats, bluster and non-communication, both the U.S. and the Palestinians did hew close to a modicum of traditional policies. Abbas, for his part, in fact [strengthened security coordination \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-hush-hush-deal-that-keeps-the-middle-east-from-exploding\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-hush-hush-deal-that-keeps-the-middle-east-from-exploding) with Israel in the wake of the Jerusalem speech, despite widespread calls for the vital policy to be severed completely. Even when the U.S. embassy was ultimately moved, in May, [feared mass protests didn’t materialize in Jerusalem or the West Bank \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/numbers-versus-narratives-in-israel-palestine\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/numbers-versus-narratives-in-israel-palestine), owing much to the steady hand of the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah.

The Trump administration maintained throughout that it still wanted Abbas to re-engage—not only on the mystery peace plan that it had yet to reveal, but also on retaking control in the Gaza Strip, the breakaway territory ruled for over a decade by the Hamas militant group.

The Palestinians refused—and this well before the wholesale cut-off in U.S. aid over the last month and this week’s PLO office closure. “The U.S. has lost its role [as the historic Israeli-Palestinian mediator], it has revoked a contract. No one understands that more than Trump,” Zomlot, the Palestinian envoy and close Abbas advisor, said in late July. “We don’t accept diplomatic or financial blackmail,” he added, alluding to the dual threats of Trump going after the PLO mission and Palestinian aid—both of which came to pass. Saeb Erekat, the PLO Secretary-General, responding to the latest U.S. sanctions this week, went further: “We reiterate that the rights of the Palestinian people are not for sale [and] that we will not succumb to U.S. threats and bullying.”

The Trump administration, despite all evidence to the contrary, still seemingly believes that a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians is possible. “The Trump administration will not keep the [PLO] office open when the Palestinians refuse to take steps to start direct and meaningful negotiations with Israel,” U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton explained this week.

Jason Greenblatt, Trump’s peace envoy, said in a [recent \(and rare\) interview \(http://thelandofisrael.com/exclusive-interview-with-jason-greenblatt-trump-assistant-special-representative-for-international-negotiations/\)](http://thelandofisrael.com/exclusive-interview-with-jason-greenblatt-trump-assistant-special-representative-for-international-negotiations/) that a “comprehensive” peace plan did exist—“an extensive document,” as he called it—and that it was “realistic, fair, and implementable.” The problem is that after the events of the last nine months, the Palestinians simply don’t believe him.

In truth, U.S. policy is a mess of contradictions, vacillating around the stated goal of a final peace accord but offering no vision for what it would look like, least of all support for an independent Palestinian state; saying Jerusalem’s boundaries were still up for negotiation yet “off the table”; emphasizing economic growth but cutting \$200 million in USAID funding; demanding the Palestinians re-engage but shuttering their Washington representation; [claiming to care for Palestinian lives but defunding their hospitals \(https://twitter.com/amirtibon/status/1038390488703873024\)](https://twitter.com/amirtibon/status/1038390488703873024); tarring the Palestinians as rejectionists but still funding their security forces (the only thing the U.S. is still subsidizing).

Indeed, Trump’s recent claim that Israel would pay a “higher price” for the U.S. embassy decision was walked back by David Friedman, his ambassador in Israel. “There is absolutely nothing that the United States is planning that would be what the Israelis would consider bad news in compensation for the embassy move,” [said Friedman \(http://www.israelhayom.com/2018/09/07/us-ambassador-david-friedman-we-dont-tell-israel-what-to-do/\)](http://www.israelhayom.com/2018/09/07/us-ambassador-david-friedman-we-dont-tell-israel-what-to-do/).

The best that can be said is that the Trump team just doesn't know what it's doing, misjudging the world's most intractable conflict for a New York City real estate negotiation. The worst that can be said—**and many have said it** (<https://twitter.com/LaraFriedmanDC/status/1033343511922442241>)—is that this is all by design, to unilaterally dictate to the Palestinians a solution according to the wishes of the Israeli right. “This is the last nail, the silver bullet, the smoking gun of the two-state solution...and it will be killed by [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu with the full complicity of the Trump administration,” Zomlot warned.

In the near term, even the Israeli military is concerned that U.S. policy, especially the cuts in UNRWA funding, will actually destabilize Gaza and the West Bank, harming Israel's security interests (to say nothing of **the 2 million Palestinians who depend on the UN agency for basic services** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trump-wants-to-help-israel-by-cutting-aid-to-palestinians.-why-are-some-isr>)). More to the point, the steps taken by the Trump administration likely won't work: the Palestinians have shown no inclination to fold. “I will not end my life as a traitor,” Abbas, 83, **reportedly has said** (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/abbas-history-palestinian-authority.html#ixzz5QmdZPxdV>). “Nothing will happen against our will.”

In the longer term, though, the shuttering of the PLO mission could mark a watershed. After all, the mission was opened in 1994, just a few months after the signing of **the Oslo Accords** (<https://fmep.org/blog/2017/11/understanding-plo-mission-crisis-key-documents/>) at the White House the previous September. The historic agreement saw Israel and the PLO mutually recognize each other and launch a political process that, despite untold reversals, has held to this day.

The PLO has threatened to annul the accords, most recently earlier this year after Trump's Jerusalem announcement—yet Abbas has stopped short on following through. The Palestinian president's speech later this month at the UN General Assembly, followed by a high-level PLO conference later in the fall, are shaping up to be critical. Instead of worrying about a peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians, the Trump administration would do well to broker one between Washington and Ramallah.

*Neri Zilber is an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute and coauthor of the paper **State with No Army, Army with No State: Evolution of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces, 1994-2018*** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-with-no-army-army-with-no-state>). ❖

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