

## Low Expectations for Abbas Visit

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Brief Analysis

**The first summit between the two leaders is unlikely to result in any major initiatives, though Abbas could complicate future peace prospects or ties with the United States if he fails to deliver on Trump's initial requests.**

***The following is based on David Makovsky's remarks at a May 1 Washington Institute Policy Forum. [Read a summary or watch video \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-trump-abbas-meeting-issues-constraints-and-ways-forward\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-trump-abbas-meeting-issues-constraints-and-ways-forward) of remarks by other speakers.***

The context of Mahmoud Abbas's May 3 White House meeting is very different from his last visit in March 2014, at the height of intensive U.S.-led diplomacy to resolve the impasse with Israel. During that summit, President Obama sought the Palestinian Authority leader's agreement on principles to end the conflict, but there is seemingly no room for such grand efforts today. In fact, the probability is very low for any sort of concrete result emerging from his first meeting with President Trump.

The summit may therefore provide a means of realigning expectations with the current reality of wide gaps between Israelis and Palestinians. President Trump has often spoken about reaching the "ultimate deal," but he has not indicated any desire to force negotiations toward a final-status agreement that has long eluded his predecessors. In that sense, his statements on the issue may be in keeping with his apparent tactical approach in other contexts, namely, declaring a maximal objective but settling for less than that.

## A CHANGE IN MINDSET

If nothing else, the summit is useful as a means of enhancing President Abbas's relevance to fellow Arab leaders. No sooner had the White House asked him to visit than he was immediately invited to meet with the leaders of Egypt and Jordan. In contrast to Hamas leaders in Gaza -- who avoid engagement with Washington on principle and are likewise regarded as pariahs in much of the West -- PA leaders view ties with the United States as a boon to their

regional cachet.

Abbas seems to realize he will not be accorded the same treatment he received during the Obama era, when the onus was mainly on Israel to change its settlement policy without requiring a commensurately difficult step by the Palestinians. Recently, he told the Japanese newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* that he is willing to meet with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu under Washington's auspices, something he has not done since 2010. This signals that he is more open to making gestures he would not have made during the Obama administration, such as offering to meet with Netanyahu in Trump's presence if the president visits Israel later this month as expected. Similarly, Abbas's recent statement about not paying Gaza's electricity bills may be a sign that he is willing to get tough on Hamas rather than continuing the hands-off policy he has maintained for years.

## NO FINAL-STATUS AGENDA, BUT MORE PRESSURE

**E**ven if Trump, Netanyahu, and Abbas hold a three-way meeting later this month, there is no clear policy agenda for them to discuss at the moment, nor any firm framework on which to build future talks. Following the Annapolis conference in 2007, Abbas became accustomed to the U.S. fixation on end-of-conflict negotiations, but he cannot assume that this attitude persists today. The conventional wisdom in Washington is that his differences with Netanyahu are too wide, especially on core issues such as borders, security arrangements, refugees, and Jerusalem. Can he adjust to a more incrementalist approach?

In particular, U.S. officials quietly wonder how Abbas will respond to a new situation in which the United States puts more pressure on him to prove he is a partner for peace. For example, just as Trump asked Netanyahu to limit settlement activity (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/netanyahus-new-settlements-policy-advantages-and-limitations>), he may now insist that Abbas halt "martyr foundation" payments (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/if-palestinians-are-serious-about-peace-martyr-violence-should-not-pay>) to Palestinians who engage in violence against Israelis, and to the relatives of terrorists who are killed while perpetrating such attacks. Abbas may be more amenable to such demands if he believes Washington will subsequently urge Israel to make further concessions, whether on limiting settlement activity or encouraging Palestinian economic activity in some parts of "Area C" (i.e., the 60 percent portion of the West Bank that remains under full Israeli control).

## THE ROLE OF ARAB STATES

**A** tantalizing question during this week's summit is whether Abbas will be asked about the so-called "outside-in" approach that President Trump discussed with Netanyahu in February. Washington and Jerusalem both assume that concerns about Iran's regional behavior will push Sunni Arab governments ever closer to Israel, perhaps creating leverage for convincing them to be more assertive on the Palestinian issue. This is a source of discomfort for PA leaders, who believe that such pressure could diminish their own negotiating leverage -- not to mention their longstanding role as the arbiters of whether sufficient progress has been made in the peace process to even warrant Arab-Israeli cooperation.

Will the Trump meeting lead to a new equilibrium on this issue? Thus far, Arab states have indicated that they will not gallop ahead of the Palestinians in any overt fashion for fear of incurring a domestic political price. This means they will likely keep their security and counterterrorism ties with Israel under the radar for the time being.

Meanwhile, Trump could help Abbas by demanding that the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states repair their strained relations with the Palestinian leader -- a request they may heed if only to increase the chance that Trump will reward them via more assertive U.S. action on their main issue of concern, Iran. Such rapprochement would be especially important in terms of increasing the dismal-to-nonexistent financial support from the PA's ostensible Arab patrons. Moreover, the UAE and Jordan -- if properly motivated -- could help the

Palestinians with their deep governance problems.

## BUDGETS AND EMBASSIES

It would be wrong to think that the Abbas visit will be all about pressing the Palestinians and nothing more. During White House envoy Jason Greenblatt's two visits to the Middle East, he signaled that the administration favors expanding economic development opportunities for the PA. Similarly, unconfirmed reports indicate that the United States does not plan to cut Palestinian aid, and may in fact increase it slightly. U.S. aid to the Palestinians in 2017 includes approximately \$280 million in general funding (largely focused on projects by the U.S. Agency for International Development) and another \$50 million for improving security cooperation with Israel. Yet none of this aid is direct budgetary assistance -- a sharp contrast with the situation before 2014, when Washington fed an additional \$200 million into a PA budget that was overseen by then-prime minister Salam Fayyad, who was widely respected for his focus on development projects and transparency.

Another factor that could put Abbas's mind at ease is President Trump's recent silence on the issue of relocating the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to western Jerusalem, in contrast to the days immediately after his inauguration. In an interview with the *Washington Post* shortly after his own meeting with Trump, Jordan's King Abdullah said the United States should hold off on this measure unless it is part of a package of peace initiatives between Israel and the Palestinians. To be sure, Trump could surprise people by reviving the issue during his proposed visit to Israel this month; alternatively, that visit may be intended in part as compensation for setting the embassy issue aside. According to a 1995 U.S. law, the president is required to sign a national security waiver every six months in order to keep the embassy in Tel Aviv; Trump would need to sign the next waiver by June 1. (Interestingly, his Israel visit will presumably be conducted as part of a trip to the May 25 NATO summit in Brussels, so he may be in Jerusalem on May 23-24 -- a date that Israelis will celebrate as the fiftieth anniversary of the city's reunification following the 1967 war.)

## CONCLUSION

The context for this week's Trump-Abbas summit is very different from previous visits, and the question is whether the two leaders can recalibrate expectations accordingly. President Trump no doubt hopes to show he is different from Obama, and he wants Abbas and Netanyahu to demonstrate that they can deliver on his requests. Failure to deliver could sour ties at an early stage, and neither Abbas nor other regional leaders would benefit from that.

*David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. His publications include the Transition 2017 paper ' [Toward a New Paradigm for Addressing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/toward-a-new-paradigm-for-addressing-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/toward-a-new-paradigm-for-addressing-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict>) ' (coauthored with Dennis Ross). ❖*

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