

The Trump-Abbas Meeting: Issues, Constraints, and Ways Forward

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Brief Analysis

Watch leading American, Israeli, and Palestinian experts preview Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas' May 3 White House meeting with President Trump.

On May 1, Ghaith al-Omari, Ehud Yaari, David Makovsky, and Dennis Ross addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Omari is a senior fellow at the Institute, former advisor to the Palestinian Authority, and

author of the recent report [Governance as a Path to Palestinian Political Rejuvenation](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/governance-as-a-path-to-palestinian-political-rejuvenation)

[\(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/governance-as-a-path-to-palestinian-political-rejuvenation>\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/governance-as-a-path-to-palestinian-political-rejuvenation). Yaari is a Lafer International Fellow with the Institute and a Middle East commentator for Israel's Channel Two television. Makovsky is the Institute's Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and coauthor (with Ross) of its 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>). Ross is the Institute's William Davidson Distinguished Fellow and former U.S. point man on the peace process. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Ghaith al-Omari

Today in the Palestinian territories, the political situation bears similarities to the situation preceding the first two intifadas, creating the possibility of another outbreak. Namely, [the Palestinian Authority \(PA\) lacks legitimacy](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-abbas-trump-agenda-urging-modest-steps-toward-peace) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-abbas-trump-agenda-urging-modest-steps-toward-peace>) due to corruption, poor governance, and an inability to register achievements in the peace process. Lacking popular support, the PA has a weakened hold on the mechanisms of government control. A concurrent lack of faith in the peace process makes the situation more volatile still. Indeed, if Palestinians do not see their goals advanced through diplomacy, they may turn to other means to address their grievances.

Another factor suggesting the possibility of a new intifada is generational: today's younger Palestinians simply do not remember the costs of the earlier intifadas. So far, the PA security forces have kept a lid on tensions, but their powers to contain dissent are limited. The best way to truly prevent an intifada is for the PA to gain broad legitimacy among the Palestinian public. This would require a vigorous push to implement governance reforms, eliminate corruption, and open up political space for grassroots dialogue.

In the broader regional context, the Saudis and other Gulf states may be willing to help with the Palestinian situation, but the United States first must show a serious commitment to confronting Iran, these states' regional adversary. Once assured of this U.S. commitment, they may be willing to join an open U.S.-PA dialogue, in which they can support and prod the PA as necessary. If the Arab states demonstrate buy-in to such a process, PA president Mahmoud Abbas himself will be forced to stay involved.

Ehud Yaari

As Mahmoud Abbas makes his way to Washington, U.S. president Donald Trump must be mindful of the local Palestinian context in striving to develop a dialogue that enables concrete improvements in the diplomatic situation.

For his part, Abbas realizes the tenuousness of his position in the PA, and he is taking strong steps to protect himself. He thus privately admonished his security chief, Majid Faraj, after Faraj appeared to be consolidating too much power. Furthermore, he is reluctant to choose a successor, fearing such a figure will be empowered at his own expense. His brittle grasp on power also means he is unlikely to strike a final-status peace deal, even if the Israelis make a relatively generous offer. He does not want to be known as the leader who betrayed the Palestinian commitment to allow millions of refugees to return to their homes. Abbas, moreover, understands that Trump will be a harsher interlocutor than Obama was, and the PA leader will likely seek to minimize potential damage to his name during the Trump meeting.

At home, Abbas has cracked down on Hamas, cutting funding for electricity and reducing officials' salaries. Hamas, meanwhile, has indicated a possible willingness to enter into some kind of power-sharing arrangement with Abbas's Fatah faction in the Gaza Strip. In practice, Hamas's role would resemble Hezbollah's in Lebanon, where the government officially runs state institutions and security forces but the militant group wields greater power de facto.

Altogether, conditions do not appear to be ripe for a major breakthrough on a final-status deal, and a failed attempt could backfire. Instead, the Trump administration should lay the groundwork for a generous interim agreement whereby Israel would cede to the Palestinians control of the majority of the West Bank. If Trump is eager for an immediate victory, he can ask Abbas to recognize the historical Jewish connection to Israel and Jerusalem. But he should acknowledge the high unlikelihood of a final-status agreement -- and act accordingly.

David Makovsky

Abbas takes pride in his past defiance of the United States, once declaring that he had said "no" twelve times to former president Barack Obama. President Trump, however, has signaled that he will not go as easy on Abbas as Obama did, and will be less willing to take no for an answer. Likely recognizing this changed dynamic, Abbas will adjust to his new reality. He also is enjoying his turn in the limelight, a result of renewed U.S. interest in the peace process. Therefore, he will want to remain relevant to Trump.

While the Arab states certainly have an interest in renewing the peace process, a large regional conference is unlikely to take place in the near future. To be effective, such a conference would need to mark the first step in a lengthier process, rather than being simply a single event. Indeed, expending significant energy on a one-off conference that produces no substantial change risks squandering the president's credibility.

On the Israeli side, officials increasingly recognize the urgency of the Palestinian issue. One former Mossad head, Tamir Pardo, publicly identified it as Israel's most important existential threat. To address this issue and others important to him, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu must maintain his good relationship with Trump. He demonstrated such a commitment when Israel unilaterally announced its intentions to restrain settlement construction somewhat, a clear response to Trump's request for such a step. For his entire tenure as premier, Netanyahu has longed to work with a Republican president. If he can't partner successfully with this one, he will look like the problem, not the Americans.

Dennis Ross

Israelis and Palestinians today are as pessimistic about a final-status deal as they have been in the past thirty years. Yet despite the temptation to leave the problem alone, allowing a power vacuum to form does not constitute a feasible option. As experience has shown in Iraq, Syria, as well as in the Palestinian context, the worst actors will fill such a vacuum. Since President Trump has made his interest in the Israeli-Palestinian issue clear, he should approach the meeting with Abbas in a way that empowers the PA leader to improve the situation.

In particular, Trump must make a request of Abbas, although, crucially, he should not expect an immediate answer. Rather, he must give Abbas the space to respond in some form over a specified period -- but at the same time insist that Abbas act. And this request *does not* involve two common suggestions -- a single Netanyahu-Abbas meeting or an end to the PA push to internationalize the conflict -- which will be ineffective since they do not materially change circumstances on the ground.

Instead, Trump can ask Abbas to cease sending money to the Martyrs Fund, an entity that provides cash payments to Palestinians in jail for killing Israelis. For Abbas, this will be a difficult move, given that the idea of struggle against Israel is essential to Palestinian identity. Accordingly, ending these payments would be a strong statement that Abbas is willing to take the necessary steps for compromise. Alternatively, Trump can ask Abbas to acknowledge the two-states-for-two-peoples formulation, a requirement in setting the stage for a final-status agreement. For this to happen, Abbas must acknowledge the existence of two national movements, one Israeli and one Palestinian.

If Abbas proves unwilling to make any concessions, then the United States can publicize his noncompliance. One of the Palestinians' most important achievements has been international legitimacy for their cause. If Washington were

to publicly portray Abbas as intransigent, that could undermine their hard-won legitimacy, giving the Americans leverage in talks.

Bringing the Arab states into this conversation is likewise important, but these countries want assurances that the United States takes the Iranian threat as seriously as they do. If the Arab capitals see Washington devising a strategy that counters the Iranians and forces them to pay a price for their regional behavior, then they will be more willing to help provide cover for both the Israelis and Palestinians to make difficult decisions.

This summary was prepared by Aryeh Mellman. ❖

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