

# The Abbas-Trump Agenda: Urging Modest Steps Toward Peace

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Brief Analysis

**Although the Palestinian leader is hesitant to discuss tougher U.S. requests and may be unable to deliver on them immediately, President Trump should make firm demands on difficult issues while offering to work with him on meeting them.**

On May 3, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas will meet with President Trump in his first White House visit since 2014. The invitation itself, and more generally the renewed international attention to the peace process with Israel, have given Abbas a much needed diplomatic boost. Yet his regional and domestic standing remain precarious, and he may be unable to deliver on some of the proposals that arise out of the summit, let alone conclude a peace deal. Accordingly, the meeting should launch a process of continued U.S. engagement, laying down markers by which Abbas can demonstrate his willingness and ability to make difficult decisions. In working with him on the best ways to reach these markers, Washington can help the wider Palestinian political system enable itself to reengage in a meaningful diplomatic process.

## POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC CONTEXT

After U.S.-led talks collapsed in May 2014, the peace process was relegated to the margins of international diplomacy, and a host of more pressing regional issues took the fore. Yet the sustained interest shown by President Trump since his inauguration has placed the issue back on the global and regional diplomatic priority list. The peace process figured highly during his recent Washington meetings with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, and Jordan's King Abdullah -- all of whom had numerous other priorities during their visits. Likewise, U.S. peace envoy Jason Greenblatt attended the recent Arab League summit in Jordan, which treated the Palestine issue in a central, substantive manner unusual for such gatherings.

Abbas's diplomatic and political fortunes have been closely linked to these developments. The collapse of the 2014 talks ushered in a period of marginalization -- despite scattered diplomatic achievements such as UN Security Council Resolution 2334, Abbas grew more isolated in the region as his options dwindled. His standing reached its nadir last summer when the so-called "Arab Quartet" (i.e., Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates) reportedly pressured him to take difficult political steps.

Trump's focus on the peace process and outreach to Ramallah changed that. Abbas's relations with key Arab leaders were restored, most notably before and during the Arab Summit. Likewise, his communications with Sisi and King Abdullah increased before and after their meetings with Trump. Yet these dynamics are still fragile -- the underlying sources of Abbas's tensions with Arab states have only been set aside temporarily, not eliminated. If the renewed international interest does not result in a sustained diplomatic process, he might quickly find himself isolated again.

Abbas has also been facing a string of domestic political challenges. Some of these were preexisting problems that only intensified when the 2014 talks collapsed. The split with Hamas became more entrenched than ever, and polls showed that nearly two-thirds of the Palestinian public believed he should step down. Even more serious problems surfaced within his own Fatah movement, where some key members challenged him overtly and covertly while others positioned themselves to succeed the eighty-two-year-old president.

To sidestep these challenges, Abbas held the long-delayed Fatah General Conference (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/fatahs-general-conference-clarifying-succession-and-managing-dissent>) late last year, reaffirming his position as the movement's leader and pushing out his opponents, most notably former Central Committee member Mohammad Dahlan. Yet the conference did not produce any new vision for Fatah beyond a tired diplomatic strategy that has little public resonance. And rather than attracting younger members, Abbas's consolidation of power through the election of loyalists alienated key constituencies, further shrinking Fatah's base. Most notably, Marwan Barghouti -- the popular Fatah leader who is serving five life terms in Israeli jails on terrorism and murder convictions -- was passed over during the allocation of Central Committee portfolios despite garnering the most votes at the conference, and none of his supporters were elected to significant positions. On April 17, Barghouti called for a large-scale hunger strike that was intended not only as a shot at Israeli authorities, but also as a show of force against Abbas, demonstrating his continued political importance.

## SUMMIT DYNAMICS

**A**bbas understands that his newfound relevance depends almost exclusively on the extent to which Washington continues making the peace process a priority, which gives Trump tremendous leverage during the summit. Yet Abbas also realizes that his domestic vulnerability and limited regional diplomatic credit will constrain his ability to deliver on any U.S. demands.

When Netanyahu met with Trump, he was asked to "hold back on settlements" -- a request that did not meet the Palestinian demand for a full freeze on settlement construction but was nevertheless a weighty challenge for the prime minister given the current state of Israeli domestic politics. Abbas can expect Trump to make similarly substantive requests of him. Three issues in particular could take the spotlight:

**1. Stopping "martyr" payments.** The PA's practice of paying money to individuals who engage in violence and their families has reemerged as a central concern (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/if-palestinians-are-serious-about-peace-martyr-violence-should-not-pay>) in Washington, particularly after U.S. Army veteran Taylor Force was murdered by a Palestinian in Tel Aviv last year. The issue figured highly during Trump's meeting with Netanyahu, and Abbas will likely be asked to stop such payments next week. Doing so would be politically challenging for him under any circumstances, but more so today in the midst of the Barghouti-led

hunger strike.

**2. Recognizing Israel as a Jewish state.** First raised as a central negotiating issue by Israel during the 2007 Annapolis process, this has become a major public point of disagreement between leaders on both sides. Trump and Netanyahu discussed it at length in February, and U.S. officials reportedly mentioned it in recent meetings with Abbas. While opinion polls indicate potential flexibility on this issue among the Palestinian public, Abbas's political opponents could attack him if they perceive that he is making such a pronouncement under American pressure.

**3. Embracing a regional approach to the peace process.** Often referred to as "outside-in," this approach entails Arab states playing a greater role in the peace process, including open engagement of Israel. Trump has already noted that such moves could help create a "bigger canvas." Yet while Palestinians traditionally welcomed Arab support in the peace process, any role that entails more pressure from Arab leaders is a concern for Abbas given his recent tensions with them. Additionally, some Palestinians fear that such an approach would dilute the centrality of their cause in favor of broader Arab-Israeli concerns.

Thus far, Abbas has sought to preempt these requests and any other difficult tasks by shifting the summit's focus to less demanding topics. For one, his inclusion of Maj. Gen. Majid Faraj in the Palestinian delegation indicates that he wants to discuss security. This would allow him to build on a proven success story, since significant progress has been made in this sector with the help of the U.S. Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Likewise, the inclusion of Palestine Investment Fund chairman Muhammad Mustafa is no doubt an effort to capitalize on the Trump administration's interest in developing the Palestinian economy, as demonstrated by Greenblatt's repeated engagement with the Palestinian private sector.

Diplomatically, Abbas may tell Trump that he will cease or limit Palestinian efforts to internationalize the conflict via the UN and other fora. The internationalization strategy has lost direction and popular momentum in recent months, so he can afford to make this concession with manageable political repercussions.

A more potent diplomatic gesture would be an offer to resume bilateral peace talks with Israel under American auspices. On April 19, Abbas indicated that he is "ready to meet the prime minister of Israel any time in Washington under the patronage of President Trump." While any such meeting would be politically costly for him, especially if held without garnering a full settlement freeze and further prisoner releases in advance, it would still be less politically damaging than other issues Trump may raise. Additionally, Abbas is familiar with bilateral negotiations and confident of his ability to maneuver within that framework.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

**A**lthough announcing a summit between Palestinian and Israeli leaders, who have not met since 2010, would be a positive development, launching a negotiation process without a change of context risks repeating a dangerous pattern. Talks between leaders who are unwilling or unable to reach a deal are destined for failure, with both sides focusing instead on shifting blame. Such failure would come with a price, whether in terms of deepening suspicions between the two sides (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/palestinians-arent-ready-to-make-peace-with-israel-but-that-doesnt-rule-out>), further eroding the credibility of diplomacy among their publics, or even sparking a security breakdown -- an extreme but not outlandish scenario.

Creating a new context has many components. Washington's ongoing conversations with Israel on settlements are one, as are the Trump administration's emerging policies on other issues of concern to the region, particularly Iran.

But the Palestinians must also help create this new context by breaking ground on some of the specific changes mentioned above. Abbas probably cannot deliver on them immediately, but if U.S. demands are accompanied by the carrot of continuing engagement with the PA, and the promise of deliverables in the security and economic spheres, they would be hard for Abbas to dismiss -- especially if the stick of neglect is held out as the alternative. The May 3

meeting can launch a process in which Washington probes the PA's ability to make these compromises and, ultimately, take the more difficult steps entailed in a peace deal. Part of that bilateral process would involve devising mechanisms and setting timelines for reaching these objectives.

Key Arab states can also be involved in the process, offering political and financial inducements and, when necessary, bringing pressure to bear on the Palestinians. This would have the additional benefit of letting Washington know what can be expected from these states if a full "outside-in" peace process is launched.

For now, though, the prospect of final-status Palestinian-Israeli negotiations seems premature. Instead, Washington should consider a process that pushes the parties to realign their politics by engaging them on limited but significant steps toward peace, in tandem with a wider regional strategy that increases U.S. leverage on other actors. Such an approach could lay the groundwork for a peace process that actually has a chance of succeeding in the not-so-distant future.

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