

Beyond 'One State': Preliminary Conclusions from the Netanyahu Meeting

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Brief Analysis

The president's 'one state' comment may have been offhand, and the idea is a nonstarter in any case, but the two leaders did seem to agree in principle on a mechanism that would likely limit settlement activity.

One of the main goals of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's February 15 White House visit was to rejuvenate the U.S.-Israel relationship by putting aside the policy friction of the past several years. In that sense the summit was a success, with he and President Trump going out of their way to compliment each other. Yet the implications for U.S. policy on a core bilateral issue -- the long-stalled peace process with the Palestinians -- are less clear cut and merit a closer look.

"ONE STATE" IS NO FAVOR TO NETANYAHU

The moment that captured most of the post-summit headlines was Trump's open acceptance of either a one-state or two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so long as both parties agree to it. This suggested that the U.S. government was walking back the two-state commitments it has embraced since 2001.

Trump's statement may have been intended to help Netanyahu with domestic coalition politics at home, where right-wing factions have increasingly come to oppose the two-state model. Prior to the summit, for instance, Education Minister Naftali Bennett demanded that his rival Netanyahu avoid reaffirming support for that model. Yet Trump likely did Netanyahu no favors in mentioning a one-state scenario, since there is little chance the prime minister could ever accept such an outcome. Netanyahu knows that focusing on one state would only help Hamas and discredit the Palestinian Authority, while also making it more difficult for him to fend off Bennett's repeated challenges to his authority. Therefore, he studiously avoided endorsing the one-state idea at his press conference with Trump, making clear that Israel does not want to annex 2.75 million West Bank Palestinians.

Even those to Netanyahu's right understand the dangers of a one-state approach. In a little-noticed radio interview in Israel this week, Bennett ally Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked conceded that annexing the entire West Bank would lead to the "end of the Jewish state" -- seemingly recognizing that the collapse of the Palestinian Authority would probably result in demands for "one person, one vote" by an Israeli Arab/Palestinian population that could nearly triple in size almost at once.

Similarly, Arab states are unlikely to facilitate peace negotiations if the intended route is an Israeli-endorsed one-state approach. The famously risk-averse Arab governments want to be seen as advocating on behalf of the Palestinians, not capitulating to Israeli demands, especially given how sensitive their publics are about the issue. If the preferred Israeli destination is one state, they would reap no political advantages from remotely associating themselves with such a process.

Taken together, these factors seem to make the one-state idea a nonstarter, so Trump's comment may have been an offhand bid to remain publicly noncommittal for now rather than signal a genuine policy shift. The administration did not conduct a major policy review beforehand that would justify such a momentous shift. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that U.S. ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley reaffirmed Washington's commitment to two states the day after Trump's comment.

The real controversy that Netanyahu must grapple with centers not so much on choosing one state vs. two states, but rather on defining the character of a two-state solution, as he suggested in the press conference. This challenge is one of the main reasons why the 2013-2014 peace talks collapsed. Netanyahu has long insisted that the combination of Hamas-driven Palestinian rejectionism and dangerous regional instability mean Israel must be granted overriding security responsibility over any future Palestinian state, noting that many other countries have accepted similar limitations on their own sovereignty. The Palestinians agree that their state will be nonmilitarized, but they have rejected other elements of Netanyahu's security demands.

Also lost in the "one state/two state" shuffle is the fact that Trump once again expressed a desire to broker a final-status agreement during his presidency. There is no domestic political constituency pushing him toward such involvement, so his repeated calls for it seem like a genuine signal of executive-level interest in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

As for the prospect of launching a regional peace initiative that might encourage the Palestinians to make concessions they are unwilling to consider in bilateral talks, the jury is still out on whether Arab states are ready to stick their necks out for such a process. Even U.S. and Israeli cooperation in confronting Iran may not be enough to convince them otherwise, since many Arab leaders lack confidence in what Netanyahu is prepared to offer the Palestinians in any context.

NETANYAHU AGREES TO SETTLEMENTS MECHANISM

Judging by body language, at least, Trump may have surprised Netanyahu during the press conference when he asked Israel to restrain its settlement activity, and the prime minister did not respond directly. In a subsequent interview with MSNBC, however, Netanyahu was more direct on the matter, stating, "This is an issue we agreed to discuss. We've set up a mechanism to discuss a way to reach an understanding." He reiterated this point in an on-the-record briefing for the Israeli media, noting that he wanted to "reach understandings" with Washington regarding settlement activity.

These characterizations, however general, are important because they suggest Netanyahu's potential willingness to put geographic limitations on settlement activity. Any new bilateral understandings would not be as far-reaching as Israel's settlement freeze of 2009-2010, but they would be an improvement over the situation after 2010, when coordinating settlement policy proved impossible given the Obama administration's refusal to distinguish between

settlements in different locations (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/toward-a-new-paradigm-for-addressing-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict>). If the two governments follow up on the "mechanism" Netanyahu mentioned, it is bound to produce more precise bilateral discussions on settlements in the weeks ahead, much like U.S. and Israeli officials held in 2003-2004 regarding the route of the West Bank security barrier.

While it is premature to discuss the likely geographic limitations of such a mechanism at this point, the mere fact that Netanyahu would mention it indicates that he and Bennett are not on the same page when it comes to settlements. Bennett hoped that Trump's election would give Israel a free hand to build throughout the West Bank; he even expressed the possibility of Netanyahu coming to Washington with a plan to start annexing at least part of the West Bank. The prime minister pointedly opposed this approach, however, favoring cooperation with Trump. Having an American anchor on settlements gives Netanyahu a policy rationale to curb Bennett's push for expanded settlement construction outside the security barrier. The prime minister fears that such expansion would entwine Israel further in a binational reality by pushing it into areas where most Palestinians are located. Politically, then, it is more convenient for him to have Washington play its traditional role of calling for limitations -- albeit not a freeze -- on settlement activity.

CONCLUSION

While the president's "one state" remarks were regrettable and will hopefully be reversed, it is encouraging that he and Netanyahu agreed in principle on a mechanism to coordinate settlement activity. Of course, the devil is in the details, and the details are still to come. Yet the principle the two leaders espoused is a departure from the predictions that settlers made on the day after Trump's victory, when they celebrated their presumably imminent freedom of action in the West Bank. Instead, they are likely to find that Trump and Netanyahu's views are not very different, and that the new administration's settlement policy may align more or less with George W. Bush's approach of differentiating between settlements inside and outside the security barrier. Likewise, the most high-profile policy shift Trump has mentioned in the past -- relocating the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to West Jerusalem -- seemingly remains on the back burner, with Netanyahu noting that Trump was still studying the issue.

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