

How to Make Trump's Israeli-Palestinian Peace Plan Work

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Resuming conditional aid to the PA is the best way to bolster peace diplomacy, or help ensure stability if the process founders.

After two years of playing coy, the Trump administration is [reportedly finally ready to unveil](#) its plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace. The plan's details remain confidential, but if it is anything like President Trump's moves so far on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, it will be bold.

Some of those steps have worked out far better than the president's critics anticipated. Moving the United States' embassy [from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem](#), for example, failed to elicit the protests in the wider Arab world many predicted, even as Israelis celebrated it as correcting a historical injustice.

Another of the administration's bold strokes has been to all but eliminate the United States' once-considerable aid to Palestinians. And while that has attracted far less attention than the embassy move, it is likely to prove more consequential for American and Israeli interests, and for the president's hoped-for deal—and not for the better.

Until recently, Palestinians were one of the largest recipients of American aid. Then, in August, [the Trump administration announced](#) it would not make about \$300 million in payments due to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA, which provides schooling, housing and other services to those it designates as refugees in Gaza and elsewhere. Around the same time, the State Department also revealed that it was cutting about \$230 million in other aid to the Palestinians, ending support for programs bringing together Palestinian and Israeli children and hospitals in East Jerusalem, among others.

This left untouched only assistance to the Palestinian security forces, long popular with both Israeli and American security officials. Yet in October, [Congress adopted and Mr. Trump signed](#) legislation that would make the Palestinian Authority, in return for accepting this and any other assistance, subject to the jurisdiction of American courts. This prompted Palestinian officials at the end of last year to [reject further aid](#).

The Trump administration has good reasons to be frustrated with both the Palestinian leadership and aid organizations. UNRWA has long been accused of failing to adequately monitor its staff and the curriculum in schools that it runs for extremism, and of inflating the number of Palestinian refugees to perpetuate its mission. Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority's president, [ordered contacts with the United States frozen](#) after the embassy move and has refused to engage with American envoys regarding the Trump administration's efforts to devise an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan. The United States has made clear that the decisions on aid are meant to apply pressure on Mr. Abbas to return to the negotiating table—a goal consistent with longstanding American policy.

Nevertheless, the elimination of American aid to the Palestinians is unlikely to achieve that goal. In fact, in the long run, it will probably undermine both American and Israeli interests.

The Trump administration is right that American aid to the Palestinians provides Washington with leverage, but it is applying that leverage to the wrong end. Few observers believe that Mr. Abbas is interested in negotiating with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Trump, having rebuffed their less conservative predecessors, or, even if negotiations resumed, that a peace deal could be reached at this time.

Yet aid can be leveraged to advance American aims in other ways. Past administrations have used it to strengthen the authority of Palestinian officials who favor peace and to [deter the Palestinian Authority](#) from pursuing Israel at the United Nations and in international courts. Congress has sought through [the Taylor Force Act](#) to compel the Palestinian Authority to cease the reprehensible practice of paying the families of terrorists, by reducing aid to the Palestinians by an amount equal to what the Palestinian Authority pays to families of prisoners and accused terrorists. And many supporters of Israel would have liked to see American funding for UNRWA used to compel the organization to reform. These goals have been undermined by the elimination of aid. You can't tie strings to assistance that has already been cut.

Aid is not just about dollars, but about engagement that confers influence. Aid programs bring American officials into contact with a wide swath of Palestinian society, which can help ensure that American influence outlasts the

current leadership of the Palestinian Authority. It would be rash to assume that the vacuum left by the United States will not be filled by others, such as Russia, whose agenda in the region diverges sharply from Washington's.

Finally, American aid has been a stabilizing influence in both the West Bank and Gaza. Many USAID programs began in the aftermath of the Second Intifada and were designed to prevent a return to such turbulence. Over the past 15 years, security assistance programs have [helped build Palestinian security forces](#) to supplant the semiofficial militias that fueled violence during the Second Intifada. These Palestinian security forces have effectively coordinated with the Israeli Army to combat terrorism in the West Bank.

By curtailing violence, raising standards of living and keeping children in school, American assistance has contributed to a long period of relative calm, if not peace. It is for this reason that Israeli officials have for years quietly supported its continuation.

Anyone who supports Israeli-Palestinian peace should hope for the success of Mr. Trump's plan. But peace will ultimately require more than the agreement of leaders. It will require a Palestinian security force that can fend off those determined to use violence to derail peace efforts, and a civil society that can ensure that peace is not just a top-down proposition. Aid to the Palestinians—conditional and coordinated with Israel—should be a part of American policy. It could not only help President Trump's plan succeed but also ensure stability if peace efforts founder.

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