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Issue Brief

Abbas-Trump Meeting: A Pointless Endeavor

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On 3 May 3,2017 Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas arrived at the White House with one purpose in mind: to present himself and his government as a crucial comrade for peace with the United States.



Mr. Abbas reiterated Palestinian demands which they have been pursuing for years: namely the creation of an independent Palestinian state based on borders that existed before the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital; the right of return for refugees and freedom for prisoners in Israeli cells.

Hailing Mr. Trump's 'courageous stewardship', 'wisdom' and 'great negotiating ability', Mr. Abbas said, "We believe that we can be partners, true partners, to you to bring about a historic peace treaty".¹

However, Mr. Trump has made it clear that details do not matter to him, discarding the longtime American commitment to the two-state solution. When President Trump hosted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel earlier in February, he said he would be fine with either a two-state or a one-state solution if both sides agreed. Palestinians, hoping he might be more supportive of the two-state plan with Mr. Abbas, were severely disappointed when Mr. Trump made no mention of it during the visit.

At a joint news conference, the US president lauded President Abbas for his role as signatory to the 1993 Oslo peace accords with Israel. He went on to state that he would be the president who finally makes peace in the Middle East. "We will get this done"² he said. He even suggested that with his leadership, "hopefully there won't be such hatred for very long."³ It is clear that President Trump is not daunted by the challenge of bringing together Israelis and Palestinians, nor does he suffer from a deficit of confidence.

¹ <http://nypost.com/2017/05/03/trump-and-abbas-vow-middle-east-peace-in-historic-deal/>

² <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/05/03/donald-trump-middle-east-peace-israel-palestine-237933>

³ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-says-there-is-very-very-good-chance-for-palestinian-israeli-peace-deal/>

Meanwhile, Mr. Abbas requested Mr. Trump to understand the Palestinian viewpoint. “It’s about time for Israel to end its occupation of our people and of our land after 50 years,” he said. “We are the only remaining people in the world that still live under occupation. We are aspiring and want to achieve our freedom, our dignity and our right to self-determination”.⁴

However, parroting Israel’s position, Trump pushed Abbas to stop Palestinian aggression against Israelis. To this effect he stated, “There cannot be lasting peace unless the Palestinian leaders speak in a unified voice against incitement to violence and hate.”⁵ To this proclamation, the Palestinian leader insisted that Palestinians were not preaching hatred. “I affirm to you that we are raising our youth, our children, our grandchildren on a culture of peace.”⁶

The reaction to the meeting was mixed. While some mocked Abbas as being “alone in the wrestling ring”⁷, the Jerusalem daily *Al-Quds* signaled approval of the meeting with the headline: “Trump: I welcome President Abbas in the White House as a peacemaker.”⁸

Another factor which was a prelude to the White House meeting was the release on May 1 of a Hamas political document *A Document of General Principles and Policies*⁹, declaring their recognition of Israel's 1967 borders — while explicitly not recognizing the "legitimacy of the Zionist entity" — which challenges the general rhetoric that President Abbas speaks for the Palestinian people as a whole. This is also a significant move because it means that Hamas has come to a conclusion that militarily they cannot go to defeat Israel.

On the surface, Mr. Trump seems genuinely determined to pursue Middle East peace and has assigned his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and his longtime lawyer, Jason Greenblatt, to lead the effort. The US President may visit Israel this month before a scheduled trip to Europe.

⁴ <http://www.timesofisrael.com/saying-deal-not-as-hard-as-thought-trump-tells-abbas-we-will-get-peace-done/>

⁵ <https://unitedwithisrael.org/trump-to-abbas-palestinians-must-speak-in-unified-voice-against-incitement/>

⁶ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/03/remarks-president-trump-and-president-abbas-palestinian-authority-joint>

⁷ <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/blog/2017/5/4/alone-in-the-wrestling-ring-reactions-to-abbas-trump-meeting>

⁸ <http://www.the arabweekly.com/News-&-Analysis/8450/Abbas-Trump-meeting-brings-little-hope-for-Palestinians>

⁹ <http://hamas.ps/en/post/678/a-document-of-general-principles-and-policies>

President Trump is nothing short of a loose cannon. Presently, he seems to be very Israel-oriented, something which Prime Minister Netanyahu has been quick to cash on, when he says time and again that he has known the Trump family for years. It cannot be overlooked that although Trump's presidency has lasted just over 100 days, this period has witnessed the fastest rate of Israel's settlement growth in any US president's first 100 days in office - more than 10,000 units have been announced. Moreover, Trump has repeatedly declared that he intends to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, in violation of US policy and international law and has appointed an ardent supporter of Israel's settlements, David Friedman, as his ambassador to Israel.

History is enough proof that Trump is not a man capable of being an enabler, mediator or adjudicator. Rather, he has the full-blown potential to be Israel's cheerleader.

Aging and unpopular, Mr. Abbas may not have the clout to deliver even if he were willing to make compromises. Similarly, Mr. Netanyahu, now in his fourth term, faces significant pressure from his political right not to make a deal, and does not seem especially eager to do so anyway. One thing is certain though, both leaders have an interest in making Mr. Trump think they are serious even if they are not.

Whatever may be Trump's strategy, this meeting with Abbas and the Palestinian leadership will be the first of many if the President is serious about involving his administration in a peacemaking effort. But Trump should keep one thing in mind, unlike a real estate deal, he cannot just walk away when things go badly. He will need to invest cautiously, persistently and patiently. Moreover, even if he does, there is not a speck of evidence to indicate if either Abbas or Netanyahu is ready to make any compromise on big decisions on key issues.