

Palestinians to the Woodshed? Trump Pressures Palestinians to Comply...

Trump leans on Abbas but Israel is afraid of surprises

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For many Palestinians, President Mahmoud Abbas is seen as something like a Quisling, a timid man who has dedicated himself to selling out to American and Israeli interests in exchange for his remaining in power. Others, recognizing that a return to an intifada would bring down terrible destruction, accept that the enormous disparity of force between Israel and the Palestinians means that a policy of accommodation with Benjamin Netanyahu and his ever-threatening right-wing government is the only possible course, even as West Bank land continues to be stolen by the brutal Israeli settlers. And Abbas is even viewed somewhat sympathetically and somewhat appreciated by that patient minority of Palestinians which hopes that international pressure on Israel will grow until it reaches a point where the Israelis will eventually be compelled to take steps to recognize Palestinian rights.

Abbas did not expect much from his first face to face meeting with American President Donald Trump, but he reportedly came away from the encounter [pleased by what he was hearing](#) even though the discussion was light on specifics. According to various media sources, Trump did indeed privately pressure the Palestinians to comply with the usual Israeli laundry list of “concessions for peace,” namely stopping what is regarded as “incitement” of violence, ceasing negative portrayals of Israel in textbooks and the ending of payments to families of Palestinians in Israeli jails, which the Netanyahu government sees as support of terrorism. Abbas might well have noted that most of the violence in the region is instigated by the Israelis, that Israeli textbooks demonize Arabs, and that settlers are subsidized by the Israeli government to steal and build on more Arab land while terrorizing and imprisoning the local inhabitants, but he prudently kept his mouth shut.

But Trump was also upbeat on the potential for an agreement to end the nearly seventy-year conflict and [even described](#) his talk with Abbas as “an honor.” Immediately after the meeting with the Palestinian president, [he said](#) a deal was

“frankly maybe not as difficult as people have thought over the years...We need two willing parties. We believe Israel is willing, we believe you’re willing, and if you both are willing, we’re going to make a deal.” He also offered “to do whatever is necessary,” acting as mediator: “I’m committed to working with Israel and the Palestinians to reach an agreement.”



To put it mildly, Donald Trump has been inconsistent in terms of what he has said about Israel-Palestine. It is generally accepted that he is much closer to Israel and to Jewish interests than he is to seeking justice for the Palestinians. The first foreign leader Trump spoke to after his election was Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister has already been in Washington for a visit and Trump has indeed said repeatedly that he is the best friend as U.S. president that Israel has ever had. He has backed up that claim by appointing leading Zionists David Friedman as U.S. Ambassador to Israel and Jason Greenblatt as special representative for international negotiations. He has also promised to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, even if he has slowed up the process that would lead to actually doing so. His Jewish son in law Jared Kushner and Jewish-by-conversion daughter Ivanka are also believed to be involved in promoting initiatives relating to Israel and American Jews.

So why are some Israelis worried about what will come out of Trump's visit to Jerusalem at the end of this month? To be sure, he has endorsed Israel's "right" to "keep going" in building settlements but has also asked Netanyahu "hold back a bit," noting several times that they are bad for the peace process. It was a warning sign that Donald Trump can be unpredictable, similar to his campaign promise to "love Israel" while also telling Republican Jewish donors that he didn't need their money and pledging to remain "neutral" in any negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis.

Though it is expected that the president will avoid saying anything dramatic during his day in Israel, there is some fear that he might go off script and press for a new peace initiative, which Netanyahu and those to the right of him in the political spectrum would want to avoid as they currently hold all the cards relative to their Arab opponents. Any American backing for a new discussion on a final settlement of borders or sovereignty would be unwelcome, particularly so for Netanyahu, who is currently believed to be about to face corruption charges and is being pushed by hard liners to be prepared to resign and name a replacement if that takes place.

It has also not gone unnoticed by America-watchers in Israel that Trump has been particularly friendly to Arab leaders, including Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt, King Abdullah of Jordan and King Salman of Saudi Arabia. The Arabs have long had a formula to end the Israel-Palestine conflict on the table, ready to go, and it is the sort of thing that Trump might find to his liking as it is very much a "deal," involving trade-offs of land and recognition. The formula was originally proposed by the 22-member Arab League in 2002. It would involve peace agreements and bilateral relations with the Arab League states as well as with 34 other associated Muslim countries, with only Iran as a hold-out. In return Palestine would become a sovereign state roughly based on the 1967 armistice lines, which would mean the West Bank and Gaza, having East Jerusalem as its capital. Israel would have security and

international recognition in exchange for permitting the creation of a small Palestinian state, which would also end Israel's being labeled an apartheid regime and an occupying power. Details about the return of refugees and mutual defense arrangements between the two states would have to be worked out but were considered to be manageable.

Some [reports out of Washington](#) suggest that Trump is intrigued by the prospect of hosting a regional peace conference later this summer using the Arab League document as a framework, inviting not only Israel and Palestine but also the Saudis, Jordanians and Egyptians. It would simultaneously address the issues of normalization, border adjustments and statehood creation so that all parties could benefit from the process as it moved along. It is believed that Netanyahu would find it very hard to refuse such an offer if his "good friend" Trump were to push it hard.

But will Trump be able to push hard even if he is inclined to do so? If Israel gets the faintest whiff of a White House demand for a conference it will unleash its dogs of war. Indeed, it has probably done so already with AIPAC's Myrmidons roaming the halls of Congress and knocking on doors. Israel still holds the whip hand in the legislative branch and among the media.

Trump is certainly aware of the fact that the end of April two warning shots were fired across the bow of anyone seeking to threaten Israel's perceived interests. Republican congressmen formed a group called the [Israel Victory Caucus](#) to supplement an already existing bipartisan *Israel Allies Conference*. The new group immediately asserted that

"We believe Israel has been victorious in the war...victory means imposing your will on your enemy."

This has been interpreted to mean that the Palestinians should now admit defeat and then wait for terms, which will be harsh if there is any resistance.



In a separate development, all 100 U.S. Senators [sent a letter](#) to the United Nations Secretary General demanding that the international body end its "unacceptable" anti-Israel bias. An AIPAC official [once bragged](#) that he could get the signatures of 70 senators on a paper napkin if he needed to do so, and one wonders whether anyone even broke a sweat in rounding up all 100 in support of Israel. Incidentally, the "bias" being referred to in the letter is the pushback against well-financed efforts to punish the U.N. for its efforts to call attention to Israeli violations of human rights and international law. Israeli partisans in the U.S. Congress persist in exploiting alleged anti-Semitism to defund U.N. humanitarian efforts to alleviate suffering of the Palestinians in their refugee camps and to counter criticism of the continued occupation and colonization of

the West Bank. The letter also made reference to and condemned the current Israeli *bête noire*, namely the non-violent Boycott, Divest and Sanction movement (BDS), a first amendment constitutional right which the U.S. congress and many state legislatures have been actively seeking to make illegal.

Quite frankly, I do not expect Donald Trump to do anything in Jerusalem at the end of the month apart from making the usual noises about how much he loves Israel. The Palestinians will walk away shaking their heads over the usual Washington message, which is pretty much the Israeli message spun a bit for the U.S. audience. But it is interesting to speculate that there might be some surprises down the road and Donald Trump is certainly capable of that. Israel thinks that the *status quo* of unlimited U.S. support coming from a corrupted political class leading a docile American people will last forever, but it ignores the fact that Israeli and American interests increasingly are in conflict in Syria and elsewhere. Knee-jerk support will not continue, as more and more the message of Israeli savagery in its occupation becomes public knowledge in spite of the media filter. Someday there will come a tipping point and Israel and its kleptocratic leaders will have to figure out how and why they missed out on so many opportunities to make peace with their neighbors over so many years.

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