

Can President Trump's Middle East Peace Plan Survive Abbas?

There was something of a motivational speaker about President Donald Trump as he welcomed Mahmoud Abbas, the gerontocrat at the helm of the Palestinian Authority (PA) for the last 12 years, to the White House May 3.

At their joint appearance, Trump was confident and beaming. Abbas, in turn, came across as eager and respectful. As Trump surely knows, to sell something you need to believe in it—and to look like you believe in it. In tone and body language, both leaders pulled that off in their comments on prospects for a final Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, even if they came across as overly self-conscious in doing so.

On the face of it, there is no doubting Trump's personal investment in securing what he sees as the ultimate deal.

"Over the course of my lifetime, I've always heard that perhaps the toughest deal to make is the deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians—let's see if we can prove them wrong," Trump declared. Whether his administration has the mettle and the patience to pull off a lasting agreement that will suffer many false starts along the way, during a process facing the implacable opposition of people far more devious than the congressional Republicans who derailed the repeal of Obamacare, remains very much an open question.

For his part, as he stood alongside Trump, Abbas gave the impression of playing ball more than he ever did than when President Barack Obama was in charge. During Obama's second term, Abbas refused direct talks with Israel following the collapse of the 2013-2014 negotiations, pursuing a policy of sulky unilateralism that aimed to secure international

recognition of a Palestinian state.

“We believe that we are capable and able to bring about success to our efforts because, Mr. President, you have the determination and you have the desire to see it come to fruition and become successful,” Abbas gushed. Perhaps he can afford to do so. In Mideast policy circles right now, there is much talk of the positive response Jason Greenblatt, Trump’s international negotiations representative, has encountered among Palestinians. This, in turn, has made the Trump administration more amenable to entreaties from Arab leaders to bring Abbas into the heart of the negotiating process.

For now, this is paying off for Abbas, whose principal goal is to remain in power—which is, incidentally, the same principal goal of every autocrat on the planet, from Venezuela’s Nicolas Maduro to Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe. And he is showing he means it. After taking full control of his Fatah faction last November, Abbas in recent weeks has moved against his Hamas rivals in Gaza, cutting salaries to Gazan PA employees and informing Israel the PA would no longer pay for the electricity the Jewish state supplies to Gaza (Hamas won’t sign a separate supply deal since it doesn’t recognize Israel.) Protests against Abbas’s government among West Bank Palestinians were met with a forthright response from stick-wielding Palestinian security officers.

This is the sort of resolve Abbas doubtless feels will impress Trump. For the same reason, Trump would do well to realize that what Abbas can actually deliver is rather limited in terms of both substance and endurance.

However desperately the president wants the elixir of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, he must also be aware of the profound sadness, anger and disbelief that pictures of the 1993 Oslo Accords, signed on the White House lawn, now evoke. A president as brand-aware as Trump surely wants to minimize the risk of the same outcome 20 years from now.

Hence, if any forthcoming peace process is to survive all the way to a written agreement, with Trump in the role, as he put it, of “mediator, facilitator, arbitrator,” American officials need to confront the elephant in the room—namely, who succeeds Abbas.

Abbas is 82 years old. To give him his due, he’s entitled to tell all those who have speculated about his health during the last decade that, as Mark Twain said first, “reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.” But will Abbas be with us three years from now, or even one year? Any sensible policy plan will need to account for scenarios without Abbas.

The degree of opposition among ordinary Palestinians to Abbas right now is another indicator of how important the succession question is. Jordan’s King Abdullah and Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi may have told Trump that Abbas is indispensable, but a rapidly growing majority of Palestinians can’t wait to see the back of a man who was legally required to leave office eight years ago.

Abbas has not groomed a successor, and in this vacuum, others have come to the fore. Most obviously, there is Marwan Barghouti, the Fatah terrorist currently jailed for life in Israel on five counts of murder. As of this writing, Barghouti is entering the third week of a hunger strike, and 1,600 other Palestinian prisoners are following his example.

Only Barghouti knows whether he is prepared to take his hunger strike as far as Bobby Sands, the famous Irish Republican Army prisoner who expired in a British jail in 1981 after 66 days without food—and whose death unleashed a torrent of international sympathy for the Republican Army cause. But his more immediate calculations will have factored in the enormous popularity he enjoys among Palestinians. As the leader of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs terrorist group, Barghouti is in a much better position to build an internal consensus with Hamas, and other Islamist and leftist factions, than Abbas is.

Barghouti, then, casts a huge shadow over the succession question. So, collectively, does Hamas, which this week launched a charm offensive based on a new political document that, predictably, has been seized by several commentators as evidence of newfound “moderation.” Moderation, in this context, means Hamas might accept a Palestinian state within the pre-1967 borders if it doesn’t also need to recognize Israel’s legitimacy. It also means Hamas can earn compliments for clarifying its terror operations are directed against “Zionists,” and not “Jews.” Still, whichever blind alley these positions pull the Palestinians down, it is likely to be more popular than any concessions made by Abbas on final status issues like Jerusalem, or the descendants of the 1948 Palestinian refugees.

Can Trump’s enthusiasm for peace enable the emergence of a Palestinian leader who is willing to participate in good faith negotiations—as Abbas repeatedly says he is—but who is not tainted by corruption, political back-stabbing and illegal retention of power, as Abbas is? It is a tall order, which is why the president may eventually need to settle for much less than a glittering peace-signing ceremony in the Rose Garden.
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