

Trump-Netanyahu 'love fest' expected in Washington

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Washington

A White House meeting between US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is expected to be a US-Israeli "love-fest" celebrating the close bond between the two countries and giving a boost to the embattled Israeli leader. However, expectations of any progress to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are low. Netanyahu, in Washington to attend the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), a pro-Israel lobby group, was to have his fifth meeting with the US president since Trump took office in January 2017. It is the second face-to-face get-together of the two leaders since Trump formally recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December.

The Israeli prime minister has praised the Trump administration's decision to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem as of May 14, the 70th anniversary of Israel's independence. Israeli news reports say it is likely that Netanyahu will invite Trump to visit Israel for the occasion. Speaking at a cabinet meeting before travelling to Washington, Netanyahu called Trump "a great friend of the state of Israel."

The affection is mutual. "The White House will go out of its way to extend a warm welcome

to Netanyahu and roll out the red carpet," Dan Arbell, a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution's Centre for Middle East Policy in Washington, said in an interview. Asked to describe the likely atmosphere of the White House meeting, he said: "Love fest" is accurate."

Arbell said the decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem as soon as May had "a lot to do with Israeli politics." Israeli police have recommended that Netanyahu be charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust. That is why Trump wanted to show support for the embattled prime minister. Arbell said: "The White House is signalling: Bibi is our man." "Bibi" is a nickname for Netanyahu.

Given Palestinians' deep distrust of the Trump administration, there is little chance for a breakthrough.

Domestic US politics is another factor behind the plan to move the embassy this spring. The step offers Trump a chance to satisfy evangelical Christian voters, for whom the Jerusalem question is an important issue, before congressional elections in November. "It helps him with his base," Arbell said about the president.

Trump, who has been plagued by a special counsel investigation

into suspected Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election and possible links between his campaign and the Russian government, is keen to show his determination to move things forward in the Middle East.

Both Trump and Netanyahu wanted to offer a peace plan "so they can say, 'Look, if you charge us, you will be throwing away the possibility of peace,'" Hady Amr, a former US State Department official who also works for Brookings, said in e-mailed comments.

However, Trump's Jerusalem decision has deeply angered the Palestinians, who declared they won't sit down with the United States for talks. In addition, Trump's Middle East envoy and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, lost his access to highly sensitive documents after his security clearance was downgraded by Trump's chief of staff, John Kelly. It is unclear how effective Kushner, who has been working on a Middle East peace plan for months, can be in covering the issue from now on.

The outlines of Kushner's plan to end the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict are unknown. Reports say the blueprint stays true to the long sought after two-state solution in that it offers a separate state to the Palestinians to exist side by side with Israel. That state, however, would have limited sovereignty and would remain without East Jerusalem as its capital and without a right of Palestinian refugees to return.

Kushner has been working closely with the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Ab-



Airtight. US President Donald Trump (L) and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu shake hands after Trump delivered a speech at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, last May. (AFP)

dulaziz, who is to visit Washington on March 19.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called for an international conference to jump-start the Middle East peace process on a multilateral level, to effectively end the United States' exclusive role as peace broker. Abbas says negotiations could only begin if the United States freezes its Jerusalem decision and if Israel stops Jewish settlement programmes in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem.

Given Palestinians' deep distrust of the Trump administration, there is little chance for a breakthrough. "Even if there is a plan, it's dead on

arrival," Arbell said.

Amr said: "It is highly unlikely that Trump would offer a proposal that even partially meets minimalist Palestinian needs, so any proposed plan is even less likely to succeed than the past."

Trump and Netanyahu are expected to talk about the situation in Syria, where risks of a direct confrontation between Israel and Iran have been rising, and about the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, which has been rejected by both leaders. Trump says he will reimpose US sanctions on Iran by May if "serious flaws" of the accord have not been addressed.

Viewpoint



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Trump may be a good thing for Palestinians

US President Donald Trump may be just the president who the Palestinian people – if not the Palestinian Authority – most needed. Historians may look back and declare that the Trump presidency freed the Palestinian people to pursue their national, civil and human rights.

In the short term, Trump has been a disaster for the Palestinians. He entered office pledging to use his supposed deal-making skills to bring about peace between

Israelis and Palestinians. He then appointed a negotiating team that consisted of his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and two lawyers who had worked for the Trump organisation, one of whom he selected to be US ambassador to Israel.

The men shared three things: a history of supporting the Israeli settler movement, no diplomatic experience and deep personal devotion to Trump.

Trump met with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Nice words were said by all and Trump announced that his crack negotiating team had started work on a comprehensive peace proposal. In December, Trump announced

that he was moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem and recognising the city as Israel's capital. Jerusalem, he said, was "off the table" and no longer an item for negotiation. Palestinians responded with justified outrage and said Washington no longer was a reliable and impartial mediator. Abbas desperately tried to secure support from Brussels, Moscow and the United Nations.

On his swing through the Middle East in February, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who has had no discernible role in the process, said the US peace proposal was well along and soon would be unveiled.

Rumours about the Trump plan vary widely and wildly. One is that Trump will propose that a new Palestinian state be carved out of Egypt's northern Sinai with Gaza tacked on. Presumably, Palestinians in the occupied West Bank would relocate there.

There has been no confirmation that this is what Trump's team will propose but its essence is very Trumpian: The New York billionaire deals in real estate. Land is land, a building is a building. Why not just move the Palestinians from their West Bank condo into a new condo in the Sinai? What's the difference?

Whatever the US plan consists of – assuming one exists – this much is certain: It will be embraced by Israelis, who probably have drafted most of it, and rejected by Palestinians. Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia will be loath to insult Trump but are unlikely to openly support any plan rolled out by Kushner's team.

Consider this: Kushner is under investigation for a range of suspected wrongdoings and CNN has reported that White House Chief of Staff John Kelly stripped Kushner of access to top secret information.

Add to this the fact that the three national leaders involved – Trump, Netanyahu and Abbas – have dismal approval ratings among their own people and Netanyahu may soon be ushered out the door.

If Las Vegas oddsmakers have

established a line for whether the peace process will be revived, I am betting my life savings against it. That is why this moment is good news for the Palestinian people.

The peace process charade is over. Since the signing of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority has put all its eggs in the American basket and what it has received in return is metastasising Israeli settlements in the West Bank, facts on the ground designed to render a Palestinian state an impossibility. The world screamed in outrage when Trump recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital but for years Israel has been systematically choking off East Jerusalem with nary a complaint.

The end of the charade will be celebrated by right-wing Israelis but they will be foolish to do so. For the charade, which included security cooperation between the Palestinian Authority and Israel, made it possible for them to carry out their strategy in a remarkably peaceful environment.

If the charade ends, Israel will have to confront a harsh reality: About half of the population west of the Jordan River is Palestinian and their proportion is growing. They are not moving away – least of all to northern Sinai.

Israel has no vision for dealing with this reality that is neither compatible with any criteria of justice, civil rights or human dignity nor acceptable to the Palestinian people. This is why Trump's imminent immolation of the peace process offers the Palestinians an opportunity, a ripe moment to create their own vision of how the land west of the Jordan should be organised – politically, socially and economically.

The Palestinian people live under brutal occupation but this is their moment to put forth an enlightened vision of how two traumatised peoples can peacefully share one cherished land. Sound impossible? Remember: It was Nelson Mandela, not the Afrikaner government, who led South Africa out of Apartheid.



Ongoing struggle. A Palestinian demonstrator reacts as tear gas is fired by Israeli troops during a protest against Jewish settlements near Tubas in the occupied West Bank, February 25. (Reuters)