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# Middle East Brief

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## Trump's Jerusalem Declaration and "The Ultimate Deal"

Shai Feldman and Khalil Shikaki

On Wednesday, December 6, 2017, defying near-total Arab and international opposition, President Donald Trump declared that the U.S. recognizes Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The president, and subsequently a number of administration officials, took pains to point out that the declaration only recognized what for decades has been a reality: namely that all foreign leaders, including all U.S. presidents and senior government officials, have been visiting their Israeli counterparts at their offices and residences in Jerusalem. More important was the administration's insistence that the declaration did not prejudge the future of Jerusalem or its boundaries—issues that would need to be resolved in the framework of bilateral Palestinian-Israeli permanent status negotiations.

Trump's declaration was met with the expected negative reaction from the Palestinian Authority as well as from Arab and European governments, along with the equally unsurprising delight of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. A respected Arab commentator instantly assessed that the declaration eliminated any prospects of an effective U.S. initiative to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, or of a broader engagement between Israel and the Gulf states.<sup>1</sup>

Should this assessment prove true, then Trump's Jerusalem declaration will prove to have completely undermined months of efforts conducted by his team to design an "ultimate deal" to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

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The premises guiding these efforts were revealed for the first time only a few days before the president's Jerusalem statement, in an important interview that his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, gave at the Brookings Institution's Saban Forum. From the first days of his presidency, Trump charged Kushner and a small team headed by his confidant Jason Greenblatt with the task of helping negotiate such a deal. There have been zero leaks from the Kushner-Greenblatt team—which is unprecedented by Washington, DC, standards—making Kushner's interview all the more important. Yet coming only three days after this interview, Trump's Jerusalem statement leaves us with a huge puzzle: If the president intended to eventually unveil his "ultimate deal," why did he risk derailing the efforts of his own team by making the Jerusalem statement in advance of, and separately from, the peace initiative that Kushner alluded to?

In the aftermath of the Kushner interview and Trump's Jerusalem declaration, this Brief attempts to assess the prospects of a major U.S. initiative to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict under current conditions. It first identifies the global and regional circumstances that we believe provide the Trump administration with a unique opportunity to end the conflict. Then, based on Kushner's interview, it outlines the Kushner-Greenblatt team's thinking as to how to achieve this "mission impossible." Next, it provides the reasons why one should be skeptical about the administration's capacity to overcome the enormous obstacles facing any effort to resolve the dispute. In this context, it focuses on what President Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital prior to the launching of his expected peace initiative tells us about his priorities—and on the impact of the Jerusalem statement on the viability of any such initiative. The Brief concludes with an attempt at evaluating the net effect of these different trajectories on the odds that the Trump administration will present a viable "ultimate deal" to resolve this decades-long conflict.

## A Window of Opportunity?

At least until President Trump issued his Jerusalem recognition statement, an array of factors—extending from the president's own motivation to a set of new regional realities—had created an environment that was uniquely conducive to the launching of a new U.S.-led effort to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Most importantly, President Trump seemed very motivated, at least as measured by rhetoric rather than by observable action, to attempt a resolution of the conflict—a deal that has eluded all his predecessors. In this case, it is not ignorance of history but rather history itself—specifically, the track record of repeated U.S. failures—that seems to motivate the present occupant of the White House.

Three characteristics of President Trump add to the portrait of a president who has a shot at succeeding where his predecessors have failed. First, his impatience will likely thwart any attempt by Israeli or Palestinian leaders to avoid difficult decisions by presenting their American facilitators with preconditions for negotiations. Remarkably, until the issuing of the Jerusalem recognition statement, talk of preconditions—which dominated much of the conversation during President Obama's two-term presidency—had vanished almost immediately after President Trump entered the White House.

Second, Trump's inattention to detail should preclude a long-standing hobby of Israeli and Palestinian leaders: to drown American facilitators and negotiators

in endless details. As Kushner's interview indicates, the Trump team has focused on identifying the most important issues and the most important dimensions of these issues—the dimensions that constituted the largest gaps between the parties' positions, thus becoming crucial impediments to reaching a deal—and on proposing formulas for addressing those issues, from sovereignty over Jerusalem's Holy Basin to the Palestinian refugees' demand for a "right of return." President Trump will want to take credit for the historic adjudication of these issues, and will charge the Kushner-Greenblatt team with overseeing the two parties' respective experts as they go about resolving the million details involved without requiring him to get personally involved in their quarrels.

Finally, while short on some other requirements of leading a superpower, President Trump is a master of marketing. For almost two years he has totally dominated America's agenda: It all became about him. Thus, even the potentially most dangerous nuclear standoff between the U.S. and North Korea has become a personal fight between The Donald and The Great Leader. With such a master mediating, it would be nearly impossible for Israeli and Palestinian leaders to argue that they cannot market this or that dimension of "the deal" to their publics. Trump will give even Prime Minister Netanyahu, who considers himself a genius at marketing, a master class in how to market "the deal."



At the regional level, there is little to add to the analysis that has now become a new common wisdom. A number of Arab states that were formidable players in Middle East politics and were capable of playing the role of effective spoilers of Arab-Israeli peace initiatives—Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen—are embroiled in different types of civil war and, as such, at least for now, are no longer capable of playing a spoiler role.

Thus, what the Soviets used to call "the correlation of forces" seems to have shifted to the remaining Arab states—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, and Bahrain—whose regional interests and threat perception seem to be increasingly in sync with Israel's. In the face of Iran's perceived regional ambitions and deeper regional penetration as well as the threat of ISIS-inspired if not ISIS-affiliated terrorism, most of these countries' regimes would prefer broader and more extensive cooperation with Israel. But these states are unlikely to pursue such greater cooperation unless their associated domestic costs will be reduced—a condition that can only be met if an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal acceptable to the Palestinians is first reached.

The mythological "Arab street"—public opinion in the Arab states—while not a force for peace between the Palestinians and Israel, is also no longer an impediment to a peace deal. With the exception of small islands of vocal opposition, Arab publics seem fatigued by the century-long conflict and/or frustrated by the internal divisions among the Palestinians, who are increasingly seen as prioritizing their internal quarrels over resistance to Israel. This exhaustion and frustration was manifested clearly in the rather mute Arab publics' reaction to President Trump's Jerusalem declaration. A few decades earlier, such a declaration might have led hundreds of thousands of Arabs to their city squares.

These radically new regional realities significantly improve the prospects of a bilateral Israeli-Palestinian "ultimate deal," because at least two pillars of such a deal cannot be resolved except in the framework of a supportive regional environment: the matters of Jerusalem and the Palestinian refugees. Jerusalem because a number of Arab states—primarily Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco—see themselves as important stakeholders in the Jerusalem issue. And the refugees issue because the problem cannot be resolved without some Arab states' willingness to allow some of these refugees to permanently settle in their host countries and to become permanent parts of their societies.



The Israeli and Palestinian domestic scenes, while clearly not a positive force, are also not nearly as negative a factor as is commonly believed. Despite repeated failures to resolve the conflict, small majorities among both Israelis and Palestinians continue to support a resolution of their conflict within a two-state framework. The reason these majorities have not had their way is that the agenda on both sides has been set for some time by those among both publics who are opposed to the concessions that would need to be made for peace to be achieved. These opponents, while still minorities, have been far more motivated, more dedicated, more committed, more mobilized, and better organized than the majorities supporting peace.

The pro-peace majorities' lower level of commitment can be attributed to a mix of misconceptions and pessimism. Most importantly, they are not convinced that they continue to *be* majorities among their publics, and they are even more skeptical as to whether those sharing their views on the other side still constitute majorities *there*. Yet signs of a real opportunity may well wake up these "sleeping majorities" and propel them to claim their rightful position as more closely reflecting their publics' priorities than the better organized and mobilized opponents of the concessions that would need to be made for peace based on a two-state solution.

That public opinion among Israelis and Palestinians is not an impediment to peace is very significant, because it means that the two peoples' leaders have leeway to reach peace: They have the latitude to lead their publics toward a resolution of the conflict. Thus, if a real opportunity to reach an "ultimate deal" to achieve this would present itself, Israeli and Palestinian leaders have the capacity to wake their "sleeping majorities" and mobilize them to support "the deal."

Moreover, research conducted recently by one of the co-authors of this Brief indicates that U.S., Israeli, and Palestinian leaders are capable of boosting the currently small majorities supporting a two-state solution to the conflict by accompanying the agreement with incentives: different measures that are important to either the Israeli or Palestinian publics. These surveys show that support for a comprehensive agreement can be significantly increased to levels that exceed two-thirds on both sides if various constituencies are given a stake in its success.<sup>2</sup>

For Palestinians, these surveys show that the most effective incentive—the one that yields the greatest positive impact—is the release of Palestinian prisoners as part of an agreement: This incentive alone can increase the support for a comprehensive package to more than 70 percent. Access to the Israeli labor market and free movement for the two peoples between the two states are almost as effective.<sup>3</sup> Intangible incentives offered to Palestinians can also pay dividends: Israeli acknowledgment of the historic and religious roots of the Palestinians in historic Palestine, or Israeli recognition of the Arab and Islamic character of the Palestinian state, also yield significant impact, changing the level of support to a two-thirds majority.<sup>4</sup>

An Israeli acknowledgment of responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem and/or an Israeli apology to the refugees for the suffering they have endured since the Jewish state's founding in 1948 can also change the attitudes of a large minority of those currently opposing compromise. Finally, the position taken by specific Palestinian leaders would also affect public attitudes toward any prospective agreement. Most significantly, surveys show that the support of Marwan Barghouti—regarded by many as the leader of the Second Intifada and held in prison by Israeli authorities since 2004—could convince one-third of Palestinians to switch their position from opposition to support.

On the Israeli side, both tangible and intangible incentives can likewise increase the level of support for a comprehensive package implementing a two-state solution, from a large minority to two-thirds. These include: compensation to Israeli Jews whose property was

confiscated by Arab countries when they immigrated to Israel after 1948; normalization of all political, economic, and trade relations with the Arab world; and the signing of a defense treaty with the United States. A combination of any two such incentives can increase support among Israeli Jews to more than 60 percent. Intangible incentives such as Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, Arab acknowledgment of Jewish historic and religious ties to the land, and public endorsement of the peace package by leaders such as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would also yield significant increases in support.<sup>5</sup>

## The Kushner Interview

In an interview he granted at the Brookings Institution's Saban Forum just a few days prior to President Trump's Jerusalem announcement, Jared Kushner, while not disclosing anything regarding the substance of the diplomatic initiative that the administration is preparing to launch in the Palestinian-Israeli context, revealed five important insights into the logic and mindset guiding the initiative:

*First, an unconventional approach:* The initiative that the administration is about to launch will be materially different from all previous U.S. efforts to resolve the conflict. It will be unconventional, banking on President Trump's track record of succeeding by adopting such approaches, as was manifested in his against-the-odds electoral victory.

*Second, the issue of linkage:* Mideast experts have debated for decades whether the continuation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict hinders America's efforts to attain its broader goals and objectives in the region. Kushner made it crystal clear where the Trump administration stands on this issue: The conflict must be resolved if the U.S. wishes to stabilize the region in the face of Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional penetration, ISIS's terrorism, and religiously motivated extremist ideologies. In Kushner's view, these issues have already made Israel "a much more natural ally" for many Middle East countries than it was, perhaps, twenty years ago. Nevertheless, he said, "I think that if we're going to try and create more stability in the region as a whole you have to solve this issue, and so the President sees it as something that has to be solved, that he very much wants to be solved, and it's something that he's personally trying to put a lot of time into trying to see happen."<sup>6</sup>

This assertion of linkage is in turn based on the team's observation that the Arab states whose cooperation the U.S. needs to address the region's other problems truly care about the Palestinians, and that resolving the Palestinians'

plight is a priority for them; Kushner specifically mentioned the governments of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE in this regard. Thus, he clearly rejected the more cynical interpretation of Arab governments' behavior that asserts that these governments don't genuinely care about the Palestinians and that instead they merely pay lip service to the Palestinian cause.

*Third, the trust deficit issue.* The Kushner-Greenblatt team acknowledges that a major impediment to progress in Palestinian-Israeli relations in recent years has been a lack of trust between the two sides. But the team does not consider this trust deficit as characterizing the relations between Israelis and Palestinians generally; to the contrary, it has taken note of numerous Israeli-Palestinian people-to-people cooperative projects that reveal an impressive degree of mutual trust. Instead, the team views the absence of trust as characterizing primarily relations between the two sides' leaders.

Equally significantly, the Trump team does not propose to spend time and energy on building trust between the two parties. Nor is it attempting a strategy for building both sides' trust in the administration's own negotiations team. Instead, the team has relied—at least this was so until the Jerusalem recognition statement—on the trust that both sides seemed to have in President Trump's personal commitment to solve the conflict and to manifest the required resolve in the face of the considerable long-standing obstacles.

*Fourth: exclusive focus on "the deal."* Kushner made it very clear that the team he leads focuses solely on the big issues that would need to be resolved in the framework of a Palestinian-Israeli final status agreement. As such, the team implicitly refuses to be sidetracked by issues (like settlement construction, incitement, and prisoners release) that affect the environment of negotiations. The teams' working premise is that these issues are distractions and will take care of themselves once the big issues are resolved. Kushner said, "We're not chasing rabbits. And then they'll say these aren't rabbits. These are elephants. These are big deals. That means they're slower. We'll get to them after."<sup>7</sup>

*Fifth: implementation.* The Kushner-Greenblatt team seems to have carefully studied past efforts to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and concluded that even the best of plans and intentions have collapsed in the face of imperfect if not actually faulty implementation. On this issue, Kushner specifically mentioned then Deputy National Security Advisor Dina Powell as focusing on the construction of an economic development plan that would be both regional and "aspirational"—thereby, it is hoped,

persuading the young generation among the relevant publics that they have a stake in a political settlement succeeding, as it will create economic opportunities that they have never had before. In that respect, the Trump initiative will go beyond "the deal" and address aspects of the "the day after" period that the Trump team believes are essential to increasing the odds that "the deal" will survive the expected implementation challenges.

## Shooting Oneself in the Foot?

The serious thinking and considerable investment in time and energy reflected in Kushner's interview about attempting a breakthrough in Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking makes the timing of President Trump's Jerusalem statement all the more puzzling: If Trump is about to unveil his "ultimate deal," why did he risk derailing the efforts of his own team by making the Jerusalem statement in advance and independently of the peace initiative that Kushner alludes to? Why did he not wait until his plan was submitted to the parties, allowing him to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital in the context of a broader "ultimate deal"? Had he waited, he could have offered both sides recognition of *their* Jerusalem as incentives for them to accept his "Deal." The answer to this question might help shed light on the thinking underlying President Trump's motivation and behavior as his administration confronts the difficult task of managing domestic and international expectations regarding peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

In June 2017, when President Trump signed his first waiver delaying the relocation of the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem for six months, the White House explained that the waiver was issued in order "to maximize the chances of successfully negotiating a deal between Israel and the Palestinians," and that "in timing such a move, [the President] will seek to maximize the chances of successfully negotiating a deal between Israel and the Palestinians."<sup>8</sup> Yet, in his December statement, the president stated that the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital was "a long overdue step to advance the peace process."<sup>9</sup> In other words, in Trump's mind, the two contradictory measures were driven by the same logic. Could both statements be correct, or were the two statements driven by the need to explain presidential declarations that were propelled by completely different considerations than those cited in either one?

Most probably, Trump's December statement was driven by domestic considerations: appeasing his right-wing base—the evangelical and other pro-Likud constituencies—despite concerns that it might hurt his

ability to facilitate a peace deal between Palestinians and Israelis. This would imply that when choosing between the two objectives—satisfying his electoral base or promoting a peace deal—the president clearly gives priority to the former.

It is in the contrast between the two goals that one can ponder the question of Trump's motivation. While it is relatively easy to speculate about the motivation for the Jerusalem statement, it is much harder to understand what motivates Trump's peace efforts. The Jerusalem declaration fits neatly into a right-wing and evangelical mindset. By contrast, launching a viable peace initiative would require not only coercing Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas—that would be the easy part—but also pressuring one of Trump's closest allies, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. And it would most certainly anger the exact same domestic constituency that Trump sought to appease by making his December Jerusalem statement.

It is possible that, encouraged by an assessment provided by Netanyahu, Trump underestimated the likely Arab reaction to recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital separately from a broader peace deal. Indeed, it would not be surprising if he anticipated that given their almost exclusive focus on the Iranian threat, Saudi Arabia and its regional allies now care less about the Palestinian issue and would therefore tolerate such prior recognition with little protest. If this was the case, then at least regarding what motivates these key Arab states, Trump's assessment seems to differ sharply from that expressed by his son-in-law in his Saban Forum interview. Yet based on this different assessment, Trump may have expected that given President Abbas's reliance on these same regional powers, and on American financial assistance and political support, he too, after a few "days of rage," would have no choice but to revert to his previous public position that the Trump administration was serious about peace. If so, might this prove to have been a miscalculation?



While it may be too early to assess the full impact of the Jerusalem statement on possible peace efforts, some general tentative conclusions can be suggested. First, the U.S. role as mediator was discredited in the eyes of Palestinians and many Arabs and Muslims, with the U.S. now being seen as a "dishonest broker." Second, Palestinian-Israeli relations might be further destabilized, leading to greater conflict and violence. And finally, the aforementioned emerging regional realignment—which provided the Trump administration with an opportunity to advance a peace initiative—might have been undermined,

thereby generating greater difficulties for the U.S. in its efforts to anchor a Palestinian-Israeli peace process in a broader regional framework.

Four findings of a recent poll conducted among Palestinians in the immediate aftermath of Trump's statement<sup>10</sup> raise alarms regarding all three potential consequences.

First, at the domestic level, President Abbas, already with a low approval rating, has been weakened further by the American step: An unprecedented 70 percent of the public called for his resignation just a few days after the American announcement. If elections would be held today, he would be likely to lose.

Recognizing his vulnerability, Abbas sought to mobilize the Palestinian street to protest the American move. "Instead of the 'ultimate deal,' we received the 'ultimate slap,'" he declared.<sup>11</sup> Abbas immediately announced that the U.S. has disqualified itself from acting as a mediator and stopped all peace-related contacts with the Trump administration. Standing next to French president Emmanuel Macron on December 22, Abbas then declared that he will not accept any peace plan put forward by the U.S.<sup>12</sup>

Working with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, Abbas also sought to mobilize the Muslim world to pressure the U.S. to reverse its decision. He also went to the UN Security Council and later to the UN General Assembly seeking to have the U.S. step annulled. On December 21, ignoring a U.S. threat to withhold assistance from countries that voted against the U.S. decision, the General Assembly voted 128 to 9, with 35 abstentions, for a largely symbolic resolution demanding that the U.S. rescind its Jerusalem declaration. Expanding his efforts to internationalize Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking, Abbas then signed requests to join an additional twenty-two international treaties and organizations.

Second, the Trump administration statement generated an increased demand for violence among the Palestinian public, with 44 percent now demanding a return to an armed Intifada, compared with 35 percent three months earlier. During the same period, the belief that diplomacy was the most effective means of building a Palestinian state declined from 33 to 27 percent.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the weeks that followed Trump's statement witnessed a significant increase in street confrontations involving Palestinian youths and Israeli soldiers in most Palestinian cities in the West Bank. By the end of December, sixteen Palestinians had been killed during these confrontations, and almost three thousand had been wounded.<sup>14</sup> Rockets have been

launched from Gaza against neighboring Israeli towns, increasing the likelihood of a gradual slide into another Gaza war.

Third, the survey shows that more than 90 percent of Palestinians view the U.S. announcement on Jerusalem as constituting a threat to Palestinian interests. An overwhelming majority of them also believe that the U.S. will not submit any peace plan, and an even greater majority believe that even if it does, such a plan will not meet basic Palestinian needs: ending occupation and building an independent state. Thus, Trump has weakened his ability to win Palestinian support for any peace deal: If in the past Palestinians thought the U.S. was not an honest broker, the overwhelming majority of them now believe that the U.S. is a dishonest broker.

The implication of these findings is that regardless of the substance and timing of any Trump peace initiative, Palestinian public reception of that plan will be largely framed by the dynamics generated by the U.S. Jerusalem recognition statement. Ironically, given Jared Kushner's aforementioned assertion that the focus must remain on "the deal" and should not be sidetracked or distracted by issues that affect the environment of negotiations, it seems that his father-in-law, the president, chose to test this assertion to its limits by picking an outside issue that could easily derail the entire purported effort.

Finally, Palestinian public trust in the role of America's and Abbas's key Arab regional allies received a severe blow, as almost three-quarters of Palestinians surveyed now assert that the Saudis and the Egyptians might accept an American plan that does not meet basic Palestinian needs, and therefore cannot be counted on as reliable allies in the peace process. Moreover, more than 70 percent of Palestinians surveyed now believe that an alliance between Israel and some of the major Arab powers already exists. Hence, if Kushner thought that he could rely on these regional players to market the plan to Abbas and the Palestinians, such a strategy has now been rendered invalid.

Furthermore, Trump's Jerusalem declaration might affect the current regional alignment itself in a manner that might complicate the American task. Leading the fight against the American step was not Saudi Arabia or Egypt; rather, it was Turkey. Indeed, Erdogan managed to split America's regional allies, gaining the support of Abbas and King Abdullah of Jordan against the Saudis and the Egyptians, who did not want to give Turkey a pivotal role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The isolation of the U.S. and its main supporters in the region and the rise of Turkey and Iran will further complicate a U.S. strategy that aims

to place a Palestinian-Israeli peace deal in the context of a regional masterplan.

Regardless of Trump's intentions, a weaker Abbas, a discredited American and regional Arab role, and an increased demand for violence could enhance the potential for destabilization and increase the chances of failure of any American effort to renew viable Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. This is the case particularly if Abbas continues to insist on rejecting an American role in peacemaking as well as any peace plan that the U.S. might submit. But is Abbas truly ready to abandon the peace policy that he has come to symbolize for at least twelve years—if not for the past twenty-five years, beginning when he supervised the Palestinian negotiators of the Oslo Accords? As of this writing, the answer to this question remains unresolved.

## Concluding Remarks

Assessing the net effect of the different trajectories discussed in this Brief on the odds that the Trump administration will present a viable "ultimate deal" to resolve the decades-long Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not easy. This is primarily because some of these trajectories point in completely opposite directions, and their relative weight and impact are difficult to estimate. A very important personal factor seems to be President Trump's ambition to succeed where his predecessors have failed. A number of other characteristics unique to Trump's personality could potentially have a positive effect on his ability to present a viable peace initiative. In addition, a series of new regional realities have emerged that constitute a more conducive environment for launching such an initiative.

The domestic scenes in Israel and among the Palestinians produce a less favorable picture. In both cases, the disappointments of the post-Oslo era produced a gradual but significant decline in support for a peace agreement based on the two-state paradigm. The result is that neither in Israel nor among Palestinians are there significant domestic pressures favoring peace. On the other hand, in neither case do opinions among the two publics constitute an impediment to peace—and important recent research demonstrates that if an agreement based on the two-state paradigm is accompanied by various incentives, support among both publics for such a deal can be increased significantly.

A potentially positive factor to be taken into account is the thinking that has been devoted to this issue to date by those to whom President Trump has entrusted the task of

preparing a peace initiative, the so-called “ultimate deal.” While many may argue against some, and others may question most, of the assertions that Jared Kushner made in his Saban Forum interview, what he said revealed that the administration has devoted considerable time, energy, and thought to its pursuit of “the deal.”

Countering these positive or neutral factors are the negative trajectories unleashed by Trump’s statement of recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. The statement met with very negative reactions from the Palestinian public, as well as with negative although less intense reactions on the part of many of the Arab states. At the very least, this has complicated the expectations that the Palestinian street might tolerate, and the regional scene might support, a Trump effort to resolve the conflict. At least in the short term, these reactions seem to have made it nearly impossible for PA President Abbas to cooperate with any initiative that Trump might launch.

Potentially even more negative, however, is the possibility that President Trump’s decision was driven entirely by his desire to appease his Evangelical Christian base. If his declaration was intended to soften the opposition of his base to the concessions that Israel would have to make for an “ultimate deal” to be reached and implemented, that would be one thing. But if his statement reveals a predisposition to give priority to the demands of his base over the requirements of a peace deal, then the odds that Trump will launch a viable peace initiative—a genuine attempt to achieve an “ultimate deal”—are very low indeed.

It is difficult at this time to assess the full implications of what appears to be a certain underlying disconnect between Trump’s domestic political needs and the logic underlying the extensive efforts of his peace team. Given the huge role played by the U.S. president, it goes without saying that if Trump is serious about pulling off an “ultimate deal,” he would have to forgo significant domestic support in order to achieve a peace agreement. Furthermore, even if the Jerusalem issue is somehow removed from the agenda, three questions about the Trump administration’s peace efforts remain unanswered.

First, given the setbacks triggered by the Jerusalem declaration, will the administration go ahead and present the parties with a viable peace plan, and will it insist on the acceptance of the plan in its entirety as a precondition for entering into U.S.-sponsored negotiations?

Second, what would be the structural substance of the deal? Would it be essentially a permanent status deal? Or, would it be a phased process, which might include an interim agreement? Would “the deal” be based on the

two-state paradigm that envisages two sovereignties, one Palestinian and the other Israeli, or on some other framework?

Finally, will the bridging proposals in the deal address all gaps in the negotiating parties’ positions? And will these proposals be built on previous efforts, such as the Clinton Parameters and the Abbas-Olmert talks?

## Endnotes

- 1 Hussein Ibish, “Why Did Trump Make His Jerusalem Decision? The Answer Is Rooted in US Domestic Politics,” *The National* (UAE Edition), December 9, 2017.\*
- 2 See Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, “Palestinian-Israeli Pulse” (August 1, 2017).\*
- 3 See Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, “Palestinian-Israeli Pulse” (February 16, 2017).\*
- 4 See notes 2 and 3 above.
- 5 See Khalil Shikaki, “Peace versus the People,” *Cairo Review of Global Affairs* 27 (Fall 2017), pp. 114–15.
- 6 Brookings Institution, Center for Middle East Policy, Saban Forum 2017: “‘America First’ and the Middle East: A Keynote Conversation with Jared Kushner” (Washington, D.C., December 3, 2017) (uncorrected transcript), pp. 9, 4.\*
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 8 Eric Cortellesa et al., “Trump Signs Waiver, Won’t Move US Embassy to Jerusalem,” *Times of Israel*, January 4, 2018.
- 9 Mark Landler, “Trump Recognizes Jerusalem as Israel’s Capital and Orders U.S. Embassy to Move,” *New York Times*, December 6, 2017.\*
- 10 See Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, “Public Opinion Poll No. 66, December 18, 2017.\*
- 11 See “White House: Abbas’s rhetoric ‘has prevented peace for years,’” *Times of Israel*, December 13, 2017.\*
- 12 See “Abbas: We Won’t Accept Any American Peace Plan, US No Longer a Mediator,” *Times of Israel*, December 22, 2017.\*
- 13 See note 9 above.
- 14 See “Jerusalem as capital: All the latest,” *Al Jazeera*, December 31, 2017.\*

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