

Facing Palestinian criticism, White House says closeness to Israel is an Asset

In the wake of the Temple Mount crisis, can Washington remain an honest broker to peace?

Before a shooting on the Temple Mount last month threw the region into a harrowing, if temporary crisis, talk of a US-led peace process between Israelis and Palestinians was light, vague and full of promise, with neither side willing to criticize the new and ambitious administration over its lofty pursuit of peace.

Those days are over.

Two weeks of crisis management were an early test of US President Donald Trump's Mideast peace envoys, and to players on the ground, revealed their true colors. Since the Temple Mount dispute was settled with an Israeli concession on its security arrangements at the holy site, Palestinian officials have been more vocal with their criticisms of the US team, questioning its ability to serve as fair broker in the negotiations to come.

Speaking with The Jerusalem Post, several Palestinian officials said the Trump administration's handling of the crisis confirmed its political alignment with the Israeli government. It was a pivotal moment for the Palestinians in this regard. But White House officials are embracing that position, claiming it is in fact an asset for the Palestinians that Trump and his team are close with the Israelis.

The crisis ended after the Israeli leadership decided to remove metal detectors installed at the Temple Mount in light of a fatal shooting of two Israeli police officers there on July 14. The introduction of new security measures had enraged the Palestinians, who believed that Israel was trying to exert additional control over al-Aksa compound, deeply holy to Muslims.

Amid riots region-wide, US officials refused to instruct the Israelis to act one way or another and publicly defended Israel's installation of metal detectors as a "responsible" security measure, given its precipitating events.

“It was a negative response by the Americans,” said Nabil Shaath, international affairs adviser to PA President Mahmoud Abbas, recounting the negotiations. “The Americans could have really intervened to stop what the Israeli forces were doing and what the Israeli government was doing – and by doing that, it would have really demonstrated its seriousness in following that up with the peace process.”

“Instead the position was really meaningless, almost,” Shaath added.

Saeb Erekat, chief diplomat for the Palestinians, unloaded on the administration last week over its silence on settlement construction and on the deaths of several Palestinians during the July clashes. Mustafa Barghouti, a PLO Executive Committee member, told the Post that Trump’s team “is more biased toward Israel than all previous administrations,” and is unable to serve as mediator.

Senior members of that US team are taking stock of what they learned during the crisis, and are largely dismissive of criticisms leveled against them. “If they are not involved in the closed-door conversations, I’m not sure what ability they would have to speak,” one senior White House official told the Post, responding to Palestinian criticisms. “You have to take it with a grain of salt.”

If the Temple Mount dispute served as a strategic pivot point for the PA, it served more as a teaching moment for the Trump administration, which considered the crisis a microcosm of the larger conflict: the status of Jerusalem, the question of security, the challenges of dialogue and the clash of religions all were brought before the desks of Jason Greenblatt, the president’s special representative for international negotiations, and Jared Kushner, his son-in-law turned senior adviser leading the US peace effort.

“We wouldn’t say that this crisis taught us that peace is any more or less achievable – we put into practice the relationships that we developed over the past several months,” the senior White House official said. “We understand there will be ups and downs throughout these discussions. This did not derail our optimism over what we can accomplish.”

One relationship put to the test was that with Jordan, which serves as custodian of the Temple Mount while Israel controls the security of the site. US officials coordinated closely with King Abdullah II of Jordan to “contain” the crisis, and largely credit him for its swift conclusion.

But when Abdullah visited Abbas in Ramallah on Monday, the Temple Mount crisis - now two weeks old - was still raw. The Jordanian king spoke to Abbas of the importance of engaging with the Trump administration in its efforts to advance peace, according to Amman officials.

“This is a way for the Palestinians to try and message the administration: We have to see some sign that you in fact take our interests into account,” said Dennis Ross, a senior Middle East diplomat and veteran of the George H.W. Bush, Clinton and Obama administrations. “I see it as a way to try to influence the administration. I’m not surprised by it, but I’m not sure those in the administration are really going to be responsive to it.”

White House officials say that Abbas takes the Trump team more seriously knowing that Kushner and Greenblatt are personally close with the Israelis - a distinction from members of the Obama administration, who by the end of his first term had less leverage and trust with the Israeli government.

“What they mean to say is that, ‘because we’re close to the Israelis, we have the ability to influence Israeli behavior,’” Ross said. “And that indeed could benefit the Palestinians, to an extent.”

Palestinian officials were particularly struck by the administration’s refusal to take a stand on the introduction of new security hardware at a site where the status quo has long been considered fragile and valuable by the State Department: any new development there was bound to disrupt it, and this basic fact regarding the conflict seemed lost on the US team.

The White House stands firm that, while it seeks to respect the status quo on the holy site, it will not dictate security procedure. “We didn’t ask Israel to take down the security apparatus because we feel that Israel needs to make security decisions by itself,” a senior official said.

But from the Palestinian perspective, this was a line strongly suggestive of bias toward Israel. They did not believe Trump’s advisers understood the metal detectors represented more than the sum of their parts, and were in effect symbols to their people of Israeli control on that sacred ground.

“Crises like the week of the Temple Mount disturbances can also be opportunities. For the United States, it’s an opportunity to show the parties that

we understand their needs and also that we are willing to make tough asks of all sides,” said Dan Shapiro, former US ambassador to Israel in the Obama administration who is now a distinguished visiting fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies.

“The administration has nothing to apologize for when it comes to being sympathetic to the Israeli position on security. They could have used that moment to ask the Palestinians and the Jordanians, ‘What steps do you recommend and what steps are you willing to take to prevent the next attempt to smuggle weapons to the holy site and target police officers and civilians?’” Shapiro continued. “At the same time, it was probably not tenable for Israel to maintain magnetometers as a unilateral measure, and indeed, they ended up removing them.”

One senior Israeli government official said the whole crisis seemed like an instructional moment for the Trump administration, which only through practice and trial will truly understand the challenges of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“This made them realize that this is not just about real estate,” the Israeli official said. “There may be some other factors at play here.”

The official cited comments made by Kushner to a group of congressional interns last week - leaked to the press by one - in which he characterized the Temple Mount crisis as an example of the combustibility of the conflict writ large. The Israelis reacted to a terrorist attack at the holy site by responding in a way that any other government would, the official explained.

“People went nuts,” the Israeli official said. “You have metal detectors around every holy place in the world - why not have them here? People realized that it wasn’t about the Temple Mount - it was about Jews.”

The official said that Israel’s lesson from the ordeal was that the Temple Mount “must be dealt with somewhat more delicately.” “Israel’s paramount responsibility is security, but the stability of the holy sites in Jerusalem is also a question of security,” he said.

The senior White House official who was interviewed for this report said that no single event - including the Temple Mount crisis - “has impeded our decision to pursue peace.”

Trump remains active and engaged in the diplomatic effort, the official added.

“There are many lessons that could have been learned about why the American patronage of the peace process did not succeed,” said Shaath, a close ally of Abbas, referring to America’s historic role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflictsaid Shaath, a close ally of Abbas referring to America’s historic role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“We are still open - I mean, if the US comes today with something really serious and will take us forward and produce relevant negotiations.

“Instead,” Shaath continued, “the Israeli government is just trying to take the Americans for a ride.”

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