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## **Trump's "Square One" on the Twisted Road to an Israeli-Palestinian Solution**

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It is impossible to separate President Donald Trump's potential ability to initiate negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians from the turmoil surrounding his administration, including the latest revelations about highly classified information, reportedly from Israel, leaked by the President to the Russians. The administration's broader competence and stability is in question, as well as the confidence Israelis will have dealing with it on sensitive security matters. Those factors will certainly hamper the chances of success of any peace initiative. Thus against this background, and on the eve of the forthcoming presidential visit to the region, it is important to identify Trump's strengths and weaknesses regarding his effort to return Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiating table.

President Trump's decision to pay his first visit abroad to the Middle East, specifically to Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority, underscores one of the most surprising early developments of his presidency: his seeming determination to make progress on advancing negotiations to achieve Israeli-Palestinian (and Arab-Israeli) peace. The notoriously insoluble conflict may be a questionable, and even risky, issue for a first presidential trip overseas, especially from a President who was widely expected to adopt Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's approach, which places primary focus for the Middle East's ills on Iran. But this choice raises a tantalizing question: where so many others have failed, could President Trump actually succeed?

Success, however, remains highly dubious. The parties are mistrustful of one another, believe deeply that time is working against the other side, and bear the burdens of past failed negotiations and current policy gaps. But Trump does not come without some advantages. The first is what any new president has: he is not his predecessor. By the end of the Obama administration, both sides had projected their own contributions to the collapsed negotiations onto President Obama's "failure to deliver" the other side. While

Obama's difficulties with the Israeli public and government were at times exaggerated, differences over Iran, the so-called Arab Spring, and Israeli settlements persisted over the course of his term, at times overshadowing the acknowledged stellar security cooperation and contributing to Israeli unease with the United States in the role of mediator. Palestinian leaders also grew weary of American efforts that did not, in their view, extract sufficient concessions from Israel but demanded nonetheless that Palestinians take early steps to contribute to advancing peace talks as well. For both Israelis and Palestinians, Trump represents change.

Another factor that improves Trump's starting point is the fact that he appeals to Israelis and Palestinians alike. In the eyes of many Israelis, whether or not they agree with his ideals and policies, he is perceived as the American version of Netanyahu: capitalistic, hawkish, and suspicious toward the Muslim world (especially Iran). This image has persisted even as early signs from the Trump administration suggest that its policy approach on Israeli-Palestinian talks does not differ markedly from that of many previous administrations, including Obama's. Palestinians, for their part, have overcome initial misgivings about Trump's approach to conclude that he is committed to working with them (and Arab states) to achieve their goals. If and when negotiations crash, whether on the launch pad or much later, the parties will be inclined to apportion a share of blame to the American side. But for now, Trump can float on their high expectations.

Trump's early popularity among Israelis creates certain pressures on the right wing government. Israel political figures and decision makers who initially praised Trump in messianic terms will find it difficult to turn against him if he starts to demand Israeli compromises in the West Bank. What Netanyahu wants least is a renewal of tensions between Jerusalem and Washington, with damage spilling over to United States support on non-Palestinian issues, such as combating the spread of Iranian influence or the anti-Israeli bias in the UN. The Palestinians, on the other hand, have to worry about bungling a surprising opportunity that has been handed to them. If initially they were worried about being left behind in a possible regional deal between Israel and the Sunni Arab countries, now they are more concerned about Trump's unpredictable reaction, should talks run aground or violence break out. Both sides, quite understandably, must worry about angering the President, a man who is known for his unpredictable responses when he is unhappy.

The third factor that could contribute to Trump's efforts is his unexpected prioritization and personal investment in solving the conflict. While Obama, particularly in his second term, remained distant from the talks and left the day-to-day diplomacy to Secretary of

State John Kerry, if Trump decides to become highly involved, he would have a chance to use his presidential weight to bridge the gaps between the sides. He has appointed close aides, most notably his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to work on the issue, which signals that he will take success or failure even more personally. Furthermore, Trump's strong opening moves in his relationship with the Sunni Arab states, including a warm visit with Egypt's el-Sisi in Washington and a first stop in Saudi Arabia on the upcoming trip, hold out the possibility that he will have the influence to bring Sunni Arab states to the table — the countries with which Netanyahu truly wants to achieve peace, and which are critical supporters of, but also sources of pressure on, the Palestinians.

None of the foregoing is a guarantee of success. The road is long and strewn with obstacles. Ultimately, resolving the conflict is an Israeli-Palestinian matter: with all the power of the presidency, Trump cannot impose a solution on Jerusalem or Ramallah. But he wields certain advantages, and if he uses them wisely, a President who has been described as the "Disrupter in Chief" has at least a chance to help the parties scale heights they never thought possible.