

Reaction On The Trump-Bibi Summit

Possible abandoning of two states ‘alarming’ to some; regional approach backed by others.

By [Stewart Ain](#) February 15, 2017, 4:30 pm

For months, two of President Donald Trump’s key advisers on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have argued that a two-state solution is not the only way to achieve peace. With Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by his side at press conference in the East Room of the White House today, Trump formally embraced that idea.

“I’m looking at two-state and one-state — and I like the one that both parties like,” Trump said. “I’m very happy with the one that both parties like. I can live with either one. I thought for a while the two-state looked like it may be the easier of the two, but honestly if Bibi [Netanyahu] and if the Palestinians — if Israel and the Palestinians — are happy, I’m happy with the one they like the best.”

His comments marked a break with previous American administrations and much of the international community, which has maintained that the only way to achieve peace is with a two-state solution in which Israelis and Palestinians live side-by-side in peace and security. Such a position was endorsed in Paris last month by 70 nations.

Gilead Sher, a former Israeli senior peace negotiator, rejected outright the idea of a one-state solution, which has been fostered by Trump advisers Jason Greenblatt and David Friedman. Friedman has been tapped by Trump to be America’s next ambassador to Israel.

“It was the one thing I heard [in the joint press conference] that I believe is alarming,” he told The Jewish Week on Wednesday. “One state in which you would have 4.3 million Palestinians and 1.5 million Israeli Arabs does not comply with political Zionism that refers to Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people and is also democratic, progressive and liberal.”

“This would provide for the burial of the Zionist vision altogether, along with our declaration of independence in 1948 that refers to Israel as Jewish and democratic,” added Sher, who is co-chair of Blue White Future, which advocates in behalf of a two-state solution. “You can’t have it both ways.”

Trump’s comments also belied those of CIA Director Mike Pompeo, who on the eve of the White House meeting met in Ramallah with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and reportedly assured him that the Trump administration supported a two-state solution.

Prior to the press conference and in response to reports from Washington that Trump is not wed to a two-state solution, the Palestinian Foreign Ministry issued a statement that said if such reports were true, it would “mark Netanyahu’s instant success that will strengthen his position.” It said also that it would “seek a broader international front to preserve the two-state solution,” citing the possible involvement of the European Union, which has strongly supported such a solution.

But Gerald Steinberg, a professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University, told The Jewish Week just after the Trump-Netanyahu meeting that “a lot of the old guard leaders [in Europe] are on the way out, and we don’t know the results of the next elections.” Many of those favored to win are “more conservative,” Steinberg observed, and he predicted that Europe “will not be much of a player” in any future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Netanyahu, who has endorsed a two-state solution, did not comment on the one-state proposal but said peace could only be achieved if the Palestinians first “recognize the Jewish state and stop calling for Israel’s destruction,” and if the Palestinians agreed to permit Israel to “maintain security west of the Jordan” to prevent “another radical Palestinian state,” similar to Hamas’ control of the Gaza Strip.

Steinberg said it was noteworthy that Trump did not “contradict in any way” the two preconditions Netanyahu spelled out before talks could begin with the Palestinians. But he did note that Trump asked Netanyahu to “hold back on settlements [construction in the West Bank] for a bit.”

“As with any successful negotiation, both sides will have to make compromises,” Trump said, turning to Mr. Netanyahu. “You know that, right?”

The two men spoke also about seeking a regional solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which until now has concentrated on bilateral talks with the U.S. serving as a facilitator. Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who serves also as a senior adviser, have been exploring this approach, known as the outside-in strategy.

Netanyahu also endorsed this approach, saying: “We have to look for new ways and ideas to move forward. I believe in a regional approach involving our newfound Arab partners. I greatly look forward to discussing this in detail with you. If we work together, we have a shot.”

Trump said such an approach “would take in many countries and cover a large territory.”

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations has been supportive of such an initiative and its members are currently visiting Morocco, Egypt, Cyprus and Israel to speak with the country’s leaders about several issues, including the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

“For years we have been involved in building relationships,” Malcolm Hoenlein, the group’s executive vice chairman, told The Jewish Week by phone from Morocco.

But he stressed that “even a regional approach requires” compromises by the Palestinians and Israelis themselves.

“If the Palestinians are not ready to recognize Israel, you can’t impose it on them,” he said. “Until now, they have been able to get away with it. Each time they rejected it, [the U.S.] kept giving them money. And they were able to continue incitement [against Israelis] and to pay terrorists and their families with life-long pensions after they killed Jews.”

“The changes in Europe should be a warning to them,” Hoenlein added. “What they relied on in the past — that Europe would come out against Israel — may not continue. ... Arab leaders are tired of a lack of [Palestinian] leadership and seeing that the money that comes in is not benefiting the people.”

Among the Arab countries prepared to work with Israel towards a regional solution are Egypt, Jordan, and the seven Arab states of the Persian Gulf — Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates — according to [Sher](#).

“I believe the tradeoffs Israel could get on that regional level are much better than Israel could get in exclusively bilateral talks,” he said.

Although talks have until now not included Arab states at the negotiating table with Israel and the Palestinians, [Sher](#) pointed out that the Arab states have tried to help resolve the conflict since they first proposed the Arab Peace Initiative, which was endorsed by the 22-nation Arab League in 2002.

“Israel has never referred to it or replied to it,” he noted.

But in the last decade, [Sher](#) said, developments in the Arab world have “brought Israel closer to certain relatively moderate Sunni states [intent] on countering expansionist Iran and radical or fundamentalist Islam.”

He said he favors a “proactive approach that is gradual and combines regional dialogue, bilateral negotiations and independent steps to be taken in order to ensure that the trend towards one bi-national state is reversed and that the final settlement ... will eventually be a two-state solution.”

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