



## **The New US “Peace Team”: A Test of Will**

**by Ambassador Arye Mekel**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: US President Donald Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner, US Special Representative for International Negotiations Jason Greenblatt, and US Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategy Dina Powell will soon arrive in our region. This “peace team” will meet with leaders of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority to examine ways to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process while also addressing issues of far more importance to Arab leaders, such as Iranian subversion in the region, the situation in Syria, the diplomatic crisis between Qatar and the Sunni Muslim states, as well as what is commonly referred to as "the humanitarian crisis in Gaza."**

The US is returning to the Middle East. There is no reason to doubt the integrity of President Trump's intentions, although he is clearly also motivated by a desire to present an achievement in the international arena. It would be hard to point to any such achievement in the past six months since Trump took office.

Trump is now confronted with a crisis with North Korea, which is threatening Guam and is believed to be in possession of nuclear weapons, as well as the ongoing investigation into Trump's and his staff's relationship with the Russian government during the election campaign. There are also difficulties on the domestic front, starting with Congress's inability to pass a new health care law to replace the Affordable Care Act and the fact that Trump has yet to make good on his promise to build a border wall.

Trump can, however, point to achievements on the economic front. Unemployment is down and the stock market is soaring, in what would

normally be an indication that people have confidence in the president and his economic policies.

American administrations have always been drawn to the Middle East – and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular – in the hope of finally brokering the ultimate peace deal. Recall the American "peace team" of three Jewish diplomats who made frequent trips to Israel in the 1980s and 1990s in an attempt to move the faltering cart. They may not have made much progress, but they made a name for themselves. They are still active on the diplomatic scene: Dennis Ross has written numerous books on the events in our region and gives speeches and interviews; Daniel C. Kurtzer, an observant Jew, has served as American ambassador to Egypt and to Israel and is now a Princeton University professor; and Aaron David Miller is considered an authority on the Middle East.

Later administrations also made great efforts to broker peace, usually without much success. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's many visits to the region under President George W. Bush are just some that come to mind.

The current "peace team" will find it hard to make progress for a number of reasons. The Arab world is preoccupied with Iran and terrorism, and they are less concerned with the Palestinian issue. Syria continues to bleed, the Palestinians themselves are divided between Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and tensions between the two are on the rise.

Moreover, even if Israel were to offer the most generous possible settlement, there is no chance the 82-year old Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas would sign the agreement. He would simply go on about the absurd demand for "the Palestinian right of return." It should be noted that the Palestinians are also skeptical of Kushner and Greenblatt because of their Jewishness.

Although the American administration is aware of these issues, Kushner and Greenblatt hope an outside-in approach – in other words, one that sees the leaders of the Arab world join the initiative – would be harder for the Palestinians to reject. Kushner refuses to despair in the face of past failures. As he once said, "We don't want a history lesson. We've read enough books."

Trump has said he believes finding a resolution to the conflict might not be "as difficult as people have thought over the years." That optimism will soon be put to the test once again.

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