



Published on *The American Task Force on Palestine* (<http://www.americantaskforce.org>)

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Kerry's Impromptu Meeting With Abbas

Media Mention of Hussein Ibish in The Daily Beast - March 10, 2013 - 11:00pm
http://www.americantaskforce.org/daily_news_article/2013/03/05/kerrys_impromptu_... [1]

John Kerry's unscheduled meeting [2] with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas Monday during his first official trip abroad was anything but a rogue moment for the new secretary of State.

While the original itinerary had been expected to include Jerusalem and Ramallah—until the White House rerouted its top diplomat elsewhere in the region—the impromptu working lunch signaled that Kerry's much-touted "obsession [3]" with Mideast peace is also shared by President Obama.

"I don't think Kerry is a maverick," said Hussein Ibish, senior fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine. He called the meeting "very significant" because it shows that "Kerry, with the encouragement of President Obama, is willing to spend some political capital and some energy on investigating the extent, very early on," of opportunities for progress between Israel and the Palestinians.

"I'm sure it had (White House) blessing," said Steven Simon, until recently senior director for Middle East and North Africa at the National Security Council, of the meeting in Riyadh. "It makes diplomatic sense."

Former State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley, noting that Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat was in Washington last month, cautioned against reading too much into the meeting.

"The Secretary did not need a 'mother may I' from the White House, but I am sure there was a bit of interagency preparation and orchestration prior to his get-together with Abbas," he said. "Kerry is trying to figure out what is possible at this stage of the process. This helps him do that. It also enables the U.S. to have a solid perspective on Palestinian thinking prior to the President's trip to Israel."

Indeed, the *tete-a-tete* came as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu worked overtime to form a viable governing coalition with Israel's political odd couple, moderate Yair Lapid and

hardliner Naftali Bennett, before Obama arrived for his first trip to Israel since becoming president.

Administration officials intend the trip to allay suspicions by Israelis and some of their American supporters over the strength of Obama's support for the Jewish state. They also hope it will mark a fresh start after a first term marked by an angry snub [4] of Netanyahu over settlements and the failed shuttle diplomacy [5] of U.S. special Mideast envoy George Mitchell.

While the White House cited coalition talks as the reason Kerry skipped Israel and the West Bank this week, it seems clear it didn't want the secretary of State—who has a reputation as an adept negotiator who hungers for a lasting legacy—to upstage the President.

“Barack Obama is the most withholding, dominating president since Richard Nixon. Hillary Clinton found that out,” said Aaron David Miller, a former Mideast peace negotiator under six secretaries of State who is now at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He predicts that “the concentration and centralization of power will remain at the White House” when it comes to foreign policy.

Ibish sees it differently. Rather than illustrating tension between Obama and Kerry, he sees the impromptu talks as part of “a careful game of expectations management, a division of labor between the Secretary and the President” that doesn't force the president “to spend political capital and open himself to criticism while reserving the gravitas of the office of the President for the moment when it will have maximal impact.”

Which isn't now. The unresolved makeup of the Israeli government and the rift among Palestinians between Fatah and Hamas “are not promising conditions for audacious moves by either side,” says Simon. “The White House will press when there's some prospect for success.”

In the meantime, Israel is just one of several priorities the administration and its chief diplomat must address. David Makovsky of the Washington Institute for Middle East Policy says Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran may be more immediate priorities for Kerry.

“Governing is about choosing,” Miller said, ranking the Israeli-Palestinian conflict behind Iran and Syria as a concern in the region. “Presidents decide what's important to them. It's driven by opportunity and whether they can make progress. It's a management issue.”

One that Kerry and his aides will be left to oversee while the President and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, the administration's point man on U.S.-Israeli military relations who is still recovering from his brutal confirmation battle [6], deal with budget cuts and sequestration at home.

Amid the exodus of Clinton staffers from Foggy Bottom, a few names of their replacements have begun to surface:

Philip Gordon, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, will take over [7] the central region portfolio that used to belong to Dennis Ross, the longtime Middle East negotiator. Ross, according to a close observer, is expected to remain on call as an unofficial conduit to Netanyahu but is stepping back from a major role because he lacks the confidence of the Palestinians.

Frank Lowenstein [8], former chief of staff for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee under Kerry, left the Podesta Group last month and is expected to move to State as a senior advisor to his old boss. Another committee veteran, Bill Danvers [9], also may come on board.

Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Elizabeth Jones, a career foreign service officer, could be nominated to stay on. If not, Puneet Talwar [10], a former Hill staffer who more recently was the NSC's senior director for Persian Gulf Affairs, has been mentioned for the post.

David Hale, the career diplomat who replaced Mitchell as Mideast special envoy, is being eyed as ambassador to Lebanon, said Simon. If Hale is nominated to go to Beirut, he doesn't expect a replacement to be named.

Not that a vacancy or appointments elsewhere in Washington may matter.

"Depending on the nature of Netanyahu's coalition, some steps may or may not be politically feasible in the near term," Crowley said. "So the nature of the Israeli national security cabinet will probably be more telling than the nature of the American national security cabinet."

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[3] <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/03/01/has-obama-lost-interest-in-the-israel-palestinian-conflict.html>

[4] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/11/us-israel-iran-netanyahu-idUSBRE88A10B20120911>

[5] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/13/mideast-envoy-george-mitc_n_861838.html

[6] <http://www.cnn.com/2013/02/26/politics/hagel-battle/>

[7] <http://backchannel.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/02/4461/appointments-philip-gordon-to-white-house-jake-sullivan-to-ovp/>

[8] <http://backchannel.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/02/4534/kerry-appointments-frank-lowenstein-senior-advisor-on-middle-east-chief-economist-may-move-up/#ixzz2MEDMPq4B>

[9]

http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/12/21/who_might_kerry_bring_with_him_to_the_state_department

[10] <http://backchannel.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/01/3801/buzz-on-obama-2-0-middle-east-team/>

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