

Kushner sounds out PM, Abbas on ways to move peace forward

US not pushing summit or expected to put forward road map

• By HERB KEINON

US President Donald Trump's top adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner held two-and-a-half hours of talks with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem on Wednesday afternoon, before going to Ramallah and talks with PA President Mahmoud Abbas, as the US continues to sound out the sides about renewing negotiations.

Kushner was accompanied in his meeting with Netanyahu by US Mideast envoy Jason Greenblatt and Ambassador David Friedman. Netanyahu was joined by his chief of staff, Yoav Horowitz, and Ambassador to the US Ron Dermer.

Following the meeting, the White House issued a statement, saying, "The three United States officials discussed Israel's priorities and potential next steps with Prime Minister Netanyahu, acknowledging the critical role Israel plays in the security of the region."

In addition, the statement said that the Israeli and Amer-



PRIME MINISTER Benjamin Netanyahu meets in Jerusalem yesterday with (from left), US Mideast envoy Jason Greenblatt, US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, adviser to the president Jared Kushner and Ambassador to US Ron Dermer. (Amos Ben-Gershon/GPO)

ican officials "underscored that forging peace will take time and the importance of doing everything possible to create an environment conducive to peacemaking."

Welcoming Kushner to his office, Netanyahu said, "This is an opportunity to pursue our common goals of security, pros-

perity and peace, and - Jared - I welcome you here in that spirit. I know of your efforts and the president's efforts, and I look forward to working with you to achieve these common goals."

The prime minister lauded Trump's visit to Israel last month, calling it a "historic trip" and saying the president was "greeted here with fantastic warmth, and he made an indelible impression on the people of Israel."

The meetings come as the Trump administration continues to talk in general terms about its desire to broker an

agreement, but has given no concrete indication about how it plans to bring that about. At this stage Washington is looking for commitments by the sides in the peace process, and for steps that could be taken to improve the atmosphere.

While it is no secret that there are many forms of cooperation between Israel and the region, said Blair, on his 182nd trip to Israel, the "key to a true relationship, where there is overt, public and strategic collaboration - what I call 'above the table,' not below it - remains the Palestinian question."

Therefore, he said, a new way forward is needed, one that integrates the regional approach with a traditional negotiation. The engagement of the region would provide "the strength to help carry any peace process," he said. "It gives the Israelis the comfort of knowing that the region as a whole stands behind any agreement with the Palestinians and offers Israel the huge prize of normalization."

And, Blair added, "it gives the Palestinians the reassurance that any agreement will be supported by the wider Arab and Muslim world and gives them local partners in the building of the Palestinian state. Crucially, it can help bring about the unification of Palestinian politics - an absolutely essential precondition of peace - but on a basis fully consistent with peace."

To forge this path, he said, "we must break with some of the 'theology' of peacemaking which has become hallowed doctrine over the past 25 years."

While he said that there can be no separate "economic peace" distinct from a political solution, he added that "measures on the ground, building peace from the bottom up, provide vital ballast to any political process."

Blair called for a step-by-step political process where confidence is built over time. "This is not the same as so-called 'interim solutions' which Palestinians fear become permanent; it is, rather, a recognition that without an organic evolution toward statehood, we are left with an 'all or nothing' position which so far has actually resulted not in 'all' but in nothing," he said.

Likewise, he added, normalization between the Arab world and Israel "can be turned into a process rather than a one-off event. Sensitivity to the politics of both Israelis and Arabs should lead us to create a set of interlocking points where everyone gets comfortable that change is happening, but in a way which is manageable."

See KUSHNER, Page 10

KUSHNER

Continued from Page 1

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At the same time, and in sharp contrast with the previous US administration, it has not spelled out exactly what those steps are, beyond general statements regarding a need for Israel to moderate settlement construction, and for the Palestinian Authority to stop encouraging or glorify-

ing terrorism.

The administration has made clear it has no plans at this time to convene a Trump-Netanyahu-Abbas summit or to put forward a road map or framework for getting back to negotiations.

In addition to sounding out the steps that Israel and the Palestinians are willing to take, the US is exploring the degree to which the Saudis and other Sunni states are willing to become involved in the process, while making no concrete demands of them.

Transportation and Intelligence Minister Israel Katz took the regional idea a step further, and at the Herzliya Conference on Wednesday called on Saudi King Salman to invite Netanyahu for talks. Katz said that gradual steps toward normalization between Israel and the Gulf states could take place in parallel to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, adding that normalization would build Israelis' confidence in a peace process.

"Israel should offer Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states security and intelligence cooperation to stop Iran and its proxies, in return for gradual normalization in the air, land and sea," he said, "a regional security axis in return for regional economic peace."

There is no regional security without Israel, Katz said, telling the Gulf states, "When Israel is strong, you are strong, and when we are strong together, Iran is made weaker."

A regional approach to peace was also advocated at Herzliya by former British prime minister Tony Blair, who said that a new path to peace exists today.