

Kushner already had his work cut out in the Middle East. But it just got harder.

JERUSALEM — Presidential son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner returned to the Mideast this week to revive negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. But any optimism that an unconventional Trump administration might be able to jump-start meaningful talks has been complicated by political crises on both sides.

President Trump has repeatedly expressed hope that he can secure the “ultimate deal,” and U.S. officials say this week’s visit is intended to show a renewed commitment after a spate of violence last month.

Kushner is expected to arrive in Israel on Wednesday night along with deputy national security adviser Dina Powell and Middle East envoy Jason D. Greenblatt. He traveled from Cairo, where he met with Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi and also held talks with officials from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

But since Kushner’s last visit to the region in June, a corruption scandal embroiling Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has deepened, leaving the Israeli leader increasingly beholden to right-wing factions in his coalition and support base and even less able to make concessions, some observers say.

Meanwhile, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas remains unpopular and politically isolated, with a decade-long split between his leadership in the West Bank and Hamas leaders in Gaza widening in recent months.

“Both leaders are focused on their domestic political survival,” said Gadi Baltiansky, former Israeli peace negotiator and director of the Israeli-Palestinian peace movement the Geneva Initiative. “That makes aspirations to launch genuine peace process a bit unrealistic. Abbas is in a situation where he cannot deliver the deal that he talks about, and Netanyahu is not even able to describe the deal that he wants.”

With neither leader able to make “courageous decisions,” one is needed from the U.S. administration, Baltiansky said.

Trump, however, is facing his own distractions: fallout from his response to the violence in Charlottesville, rising tensions with North Korea and the investigation into his campaign’s dealings with Russia.

Dan Shapiro, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel and a fellow at the Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies, said he had been “hopeful” earlier this year on Trump’s chances to make some progress because both sides were eager to maintain good relations with Washington.

“That kind of leverage has a very short shelf life,” he said. “As the political circumstances of the leaders in the region have changed and deteriorated from the point of view of their flexibility, and as president Trump’s own standing has taken a beating because of his domestic controversies, I believe his leverage has declined significantly.”

Shapiro said the administration should instead focus on “managing the conflict” while keeping the possibility of a two-state solution alive until the political climate improves.

Diana Buttu, who formally served as a legal adviser for the Palestinian negotiating team, said that with both sides politically desperate, there may be an opportunity for talks, though she didn’t expect them to come to anything.

“Everybody needs a process,” she said. The 82-year-old Abbas has “to show he’s doing something” after 12 years in office “marked by nothing,” Buttu said.

“The only thing he can do is negotiate,” she said. “He needs a process because he’s a one-trick pony and it’s what he’s been pushing.”

However, Abbas will be aware that Netanyahu is more inflexible than ever as corruption investigations against him close in, she added. Palestinians officials say engaging in a process for the sake of it would only benefit the Israeli side, as they would be able to reap the diplomatic gains of being seen to be pushing for peace without having to make any concessions.

A peace process is generally popular with the Israeli public, but only a slim majority of Israelis and Palestinians support the two-state solution, according to a

joint poll conducted by Tel Aviv University and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in August. Support among Israeli Jews declined from 50 percent at the end of last year to 47 percent, it showed.

Last month Netanyahu's former chief-of-staff Ari Harow agreed to testify against him in two corruption cases, raising the likelihood that the Israeli leader will be indicted. Since then Netanyahu has been attempting to rally his base behind him, blaming Israel's left-wing and the media for a conspiracy to bring him down.

The Trump administration's unwillingness to commit publicly on whether it supports a two-state solution puts the Palestinian leadership in a difficult position and officials have been venting their frustration. In comments leaked to media, Abbas said there is "chaos" in the administration.

"I have met with Trump envoys about 20 times since the beginning of his term as president of the United States," he reportedly said in a meeting with the left-wing Meretz party. "Every time they repeatedly stressed to me how much they believe and are committed to a two-state solution and a halt to construction in the settlements. I have pleaded with them to say the same thing to Netanyahu, but they refrained."

Roughly 400,000 Israeli Jews live in some 120 official settlements in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, not including East Jerusalem. Most of the world considers the settlements illegal, but Israel disputes that.

A state department official, speaking on the condition of anonymity before the official visit, said the administration has "made clear" that unrestrained settlement activity "does not advance the prospect for peace," but it also recognizes that past demands for a settlement freeze "have not helped advance peace talks."

Source: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/kushner-already-had-his-work-cut-out-in-the-middle-east-but-it-just-got-harder/2017/08/23/e7a58c58-8425-11e7-9e7a-20fa8d7a0db6_story.html

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