

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

THE CURRENT: Will the Bahrain workshop lead to progress on Middle East peace?

Tuesday, June 25, 2019

PARTICIPANTS:

Host: Adrianna Pita, Office of Communications, Brookings

Guest: Tamara Cofman Wittes, Senior Fellow, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings

(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to "The Current" from the Brookings Podcast Network. On June 25 and 26, officials from the U.S. and Arab world are convening in Bahrain for meetings on a \$50 billion economic plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace, spearheaded by President Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner.

With us today is Tamara Wittes, the senior fellow with the Center for Middle East policy here at Brookings. Tamara, what can you tell us about what's known about the details of this plan and who's participating in these talks?

WITTES: So, after a lot of anticipation, in fact, maybe even two years of anticipation, the White House finally rolled out the economic part of its Middle East peace plan. On Saturday, it put a glossy brochure up on the White House website, along with a very detailed list of economic projects that it proposes to implement -- not just the United States by itself, but it promises to see implemented -- in the Palestinian territories, as well as in Egypt and Jordan and Lebanon with the idea, the White House says, of creating free trade and tourism across borders, major projects on energy, and education, and health care, and infrastructure, all of which is designed to create prosperity for the peoples of the Middle East.

Now, this Bahrain workshop was originally billed as a summit that was going to bring together Israeli and Arab leaders to launch this economic plan, to get pledges from other governments to contribute to this \$50 billion plan, and to create a platform for negotiations over implementing it. As the months went by, over the course of the spring, though, the White House started to lower expectations. And so, first they said, well, it's not going to be a summit, it's just going to be a workshop. Then they said, only finance ministers will attend. Then they said, actually, the Israeli finance minister isn't going to attend because we're just going to talk to the Arabs about this plan and get their feedback.

So, at this point, Jared Kushner is there, he gave a major speech, there are Israeli businessmen and Israeli journalists there. And for Israelis, that's very exciting -- to see Israelis in Bahrain, an Arab country that's been closed to them for a long time -- but I don't expect that we're going to see concrete outcomes out of this meeting.

PITA: Can you tell us a little bit about how seriously are the other governments in the Middle East, in the Arab world taking this conference? Particularly being led by the U.S., who has cut all aid to the UNRWA that gave aid to Palestinians, cut a lot of their own funding. How seriously are they buying into this idea?

WITTES: I think that there were a couple of assumptions that the White House made at the very beginning of their efforts on Middle East peace when President Trump came into office and tasked Jared Kushner with this. The first assumption is that the main problem is the Palestinian leadership that refuses to engage and that the White House should be able to come up with something that will be so attractive to the Palestinian public that they will demand that their leaders engage on it. The other assumption is that the Palestinian issue is less important to the rest of the Arab World today than it's been in a long time -- threats from ISIS, threats from Iran, and these other issues are bringing the Arab states and Israel together. And so, you can actually kind of put the Palestinians in a corner by getting Arab governments and Israel to work together -- what's often called an "outside-in" strategy on Arab-Israeli peace. In the two years since they started this effort, events on the ground, I think, have made it more difficult.

First of all, Arab governments have proven less willing to engage publicly with the Israeli government than perhaps the White House hoped. The White House tried to convene a summit in Warsaw earlier this year about Iran and bring Arab Gulf governments and put their ministers on a stage with the Israeli prime minister and the Arabs balked. They said, "Don't make us do that." So, even on the issue of Iran, where they're in complete agreement and they're both, you know, working closely with the United States, they're not willing to be seen publicly to embrace the Israelis.

And I think the second thing is, the moves the Trump administration itself has made in the last two years -- you mentioned cutoffs of aid -- there's also closing the American mission to the Palestinians, the consulate in Jerusalem, closing the PLO Mission to the United States here in Washington. Basically, if the Palestinians haven't been wanting to talk to the Americans, the Americans have also made it very clear that they're not interested in talking to the Palestinians, and I think that's made it much, much harder to get Arab governments to come onboard.

PITA: So, we're recording this later Tuesday afternoon. Obviously, Bahrain being ahead, the conference is going on for a little while now. What do we know about, so far, that's come out?

WITTES: Sure. So, Jared Kushner gave a big speech to open the event today. And I think he tried to make a direct pitch to the Palestinian people. He said, "Despite what those who have let you down in the past tell you, the president and America have not given up on you." And "those who let you down in the past" -- it's clear from other statements from Kushner and Jason Greenblatt, who's been the Middle East peace envoy, that means the Palestinian leadership, who have not delivered on promises of statehood and sovereignty. So, they are still trying to press this idea that they can go over the heads of the Palestinian leadership and speak directly to the Palestinian people.

The other thing that's clear as this conference convenes is how limited the regional participation is. There are, as I said, some Israeli businessmen and Israeli reporters, but the Bahraini government, which is hosting this workshop, got cold feet about letting in a lot of Israelis. They didn't want to face any public backlash, and so they tried hard to restrict the number of Israeli journalists that would be allowed to come. And the White House actually had to have an argument with them about letting Israelis come in, because after all, what's the point of doing this if you can't have Arabs and Israelis in the same room?

Arab governments, many of them, sent not even their finance minister, but their deputy finance minister or another lower-level representative. The European Union sent a low-level representative and very few regional business figures actually showed up. And I think that speaks to the general skepticism among investors, the potential private sector participants in this great economic vision, skepticism about whether the political and diplomatic conditions will ever be there to make this economic vision a reality.

PITA: This is the economic plan, as we've been discussing, it is actually part two of -- there's supposed to be a political plan that goes along with it. Because this whole economic plan is completely contingent on there being some sort of peace agreement in place, but we don't know the details of a political plan. In theory, it's going to be released but that's been pushed back to the next round of Israeli elections. What's the U.S. thinking here? Do you think are we actually going to see the second half of the plan, which is really the first half?

WITTES: That's a great question, Adrianna, and I have to say, I am more skeptical today and more skeptical as each month goes by. We were originally expecting to see the political proposals from the White House come out sometime in the winter, but then Netanyahu called Israeli elections for April. So, it was decided in the White House to delay releasing the plan until after the Israeli elections in April. But after those elections, Netanyahu failed to form a government. And so, Israel's having snap elections now scheduled for September. And the political plan's been delayed again. What I think is that as time ticks on and gets closer and closer to the real heart of President Trump's re-election campaign, domestic political considerations are going to start to weigh more and more heavily on President Trump's thinking. Inevitably, any peace plan with credibility will have to include elements that will make some of his political constituents, especially right-wing evangelicals who have views on Israel that are even to the right of the Israeli prime minister, it may well make them uncomfortable. And so, if we get into the fall or into, say, November, when we're a year out from 2020, and President Trump doesn't think that this plan is going to be that successful anyway, given events in the region, why would he pay the political price of putting it out there and upsetting his evangelical voters?

PITA: Lastly, really quickly, what, if anything, do you think is going to be coming at the end of this conference? Are we just going to call it a success because they had it?

WITTES: I think this workshop to solicit feedback on the White House economic plan is going to be called a success no matter what happens, simply because people showed up to talk about what a different Middle East can look like. And although there are many, many reasons to be skeptical about the substance of this White House effort, the sequencing of it, the political context that the White House itself has created that's made their work so much harder, it is still a moment where Arabs and Israelis can take a step back from the ugly reality of their day-to-day relationship and maybe catch a glimpse of something different, something better. You would think that that would be a great achievement, but frankly, I worry that given how negative the context is, and given how poorly the Trump administration has managed the process so far, this glimpse of hope might only end up deepening cynicism when everyone goes back home.

PITA: Tamara, thanks very much for being here.

WITTES: Thank you.