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Bush Meets Abbas, but Palestinians Criticize Plans for Trip

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#)

WASHINGTON — As he prepares for his second trip this year to the Middle East, President Bush is facing mounting criticism from some [Palestinians](#) who are upset that he will go to [Israel](#) for its 60th birthday celebration without marking the flip side of that event: the flight of Palestinians from their homes.

Mr. Bush met Thursday at the White House with the Palestinian president, [Mahmoud Abbas](#), part of a flurry of high-level meetings aimed at shoring up the flagging Middle East peace talks. The president said afterward that he remained confident that the talks could produce parameters for a Palestinian state.

“I assured the president that a Palestinian state’s a high priority for me and my administration: a viable state, a state that doesn’t look like Swiss cheese, a state that provides hope,” Mr. Bush said, adding, “I’m confident we can achieve the definition of a state.”

Mr. Abbas praised Mr. Bush for “seeking a true, genuine and lasting peace in the Middle East.”

The leaders are expected to meet in Sharm el Sheik, Egypt, during Mr. Bush’s trip. Mr. Bush’s plans are creating consternation among Palestinians, who accuse him of being insensitive to their perspective on the events of 1948.

“It’s a slap in the face,” said Dianna Buttu, a former negotiator for Mr. Abbas who now works as a lawyer in Ramallah, on the West Bank. Mr. Bush, she said, is “saying to the Palestinians, ‘You have no history, and your past does not matter.’ He’s not visiting a refugee camp, he’s not meeting survivors of the forced expulsion.”

Mustafa Barghouti, a former Palestinian information minister, said, “The lack of sensitivity to this matter is very prominent. Forty-eight was, of course, the date when Israel was created, but it’s also a very sad date for Palestinians who were dispossessed from their lands. It’s a very deep scar in Palestinian life.”

Jon Alterman, an expert on the Middle East at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, said, “You’re certainly adding insult to injury when you travel to Israel, and the Palestinians have to travel to Egypt to see you.”

[Dana Perino](#), the White House press secretary, said Mr. Bush’s itinerary was not final. She said Mr. Bush hoped his visit would “create moments” that would move the peace effort forward. Mr. Abbas and Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#) of Israel committed themselves in November to trying to reach a peace agreement by the end of this year. But Ms. Perino conceded that the talks had produced “much more halting progress than we would have liked.”

The chief Palestinian negotiator, [Saeb Erekat](#), in a telephone interview after the meeting, said Mr. Abbas told Mr. Bush that the growth of Israeli settlements was “the most important obstacle to achieving peace.” He said Mr. Abbas did not bring up Mr. Bush’s participation in the 60th birthday celebration.

“The issue was not raised about what President Bush will say or not say,” Mr. Erekat said. “The issue was raised about how to put an end to Palestinian suffering.”

In another development, Egypt’s state-run news agency, MENA, said late Thursday that the militant Islamic group [Hamas](#), which controls Gaza, was proposing a six-month cease-fire with Israel if Israel simultaneously lifted its blockade of Gaza, The Associated Press reported. Egypt has been mediating between Israel and Hamas. It was unclear how Israel would respond.

Phones Stolen From Bush Camp

MEXICO — A member of President [Felipe Calderón](#)’s delegation at a recent summit meeting in New Orleans was forced to

resign after being accused of pilfering cellphones from members of President Bush's delegation, officials said. Ms. Perino said a number of BlackBerrys disappeared. The Mexican Embassy in Washington expressed regret and said that the aide, Rafael Quintero Curiel, was asked to resign.

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