

Trump's 'Deal of the Century' and Why it Still Matters

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Brief Analysis

This month marks the anniversary of the pivotal Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, the first agreement of its kind. The two nations have enjoyed diplomatic relations since the signing of the treaty over 40 years ago. Through trials and challenges, the agreement has held and offers hope in a time where peace in the region still seems elusive and unattainable. The recent unveiling of the Trump administration's peace plan on January 28 reflected these lingering frustrations faced by so many previous false starts, continued political intransigence and growing distrust among the principles. **The plan faced overwhelming disapproval from both sides of the conflict before it was even officially introduced. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/palestinian-public-rejects-trump-plan-but-prefers-calm-practical-response>)** However, the peace plan should not be completely discarded, as it contains viable components that, **with a few additions (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/alternative-peace-plan-palestinian-israeli>)**, could get both Israelis and Palestinians back to the negotiating table.

Egyptians, just like Israelis and Palestinians, impatiently awaited the announcement (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/egypts-public-backs-israeli-palestinian-compromise-wants-good-ties-with-uni>) of the highly anticipated Trump Peace Plan. When the Trump administration's full plan for peace was unveiled at the beginning of the year, Egyptians were relieved to know that the Trump administration's peace plan did not include forfeiting a piece of Sinai that would be utilized by Gazans. Although, reported by Aljazeera and other Qatar-funded media as part of the plan, this reality proved to be false.

For decades, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict overshadowed Egypt's foreign and domestic policy concerns. The conflict was exploited by the pre-revolution regime of Former President Mubarak to distract individuals from Egypt's own **internal socio-political challenges (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Egypt-Economy-The-Next-Challenge-for-the-Regime>)**. The local state-owned and semi-independent media, under Mubarak's reign, broadcasted an endless reel of news and footage that portrayed Israel as Egypt's sworn enemy. However, this messaging backfired in 2011 when revolution unfolded.

Reaching a lasting peace agreement and finally putting an end to this conflict would enable Egyptian policy-makers to focus on issues of a greater concern to Egyptians. A greater effort put into tackling Egyptian concerns, instead of on the Israeli- Palestinian conflict, could potentially give Egypt enough focus to relieve itself of some of its socio-

economic and political stresses, as well as strengthen its national security.

Nonetheless, critics of the proposed peace plan emphasize other past plans futility in ending seven decades of conflict. Critics also cite the timing of the deal, emphasizing how it was a political move primed to assist Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in the March elections. However, the timing of the plan should not overshadow the fact that the plan has adopted a nuanced and interesting approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Trump administration's proposal is one of the few plans that recognizes a separate Palestinian state with open channels for direct economic and security cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians.

What makes this plan different from past iterations is that it was spearheaded by a younger generation, willing to diverge from the previous formulas. Senior White House adviser, Jared Kushner, worked for three years to bring about a feasible solution that could achieve success. The key ingredient necessary for the treaty to succeed comes down to leadership.

History has shown us that the Peace Accord between **Egypt and Israel** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/isis-new-approach-to-egypt-israel-relations>) would not have been possible if it was not for former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin's willingness to challenge the 'status quo.' However, unlike 1979, the leaders required to move this plan forward are not present in the current Palestinian leadership, since they have so far appeared unwilling to sit at the negotiating table. And unlike Trump's unilateral move to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital city, the peace plan will need all parties present to make any lasting change.

Responses to the peace plan from Israelis and Palestinians have been paradoxical. On the one hand, Israeli leaders have understood that in order to make a deal, they must make territorial compromises and provide domestic and national security to both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. On the other hand, the Palestinian leaders blindly rejected the peace plan, ignoring the opportunity for the Palestinian people to reap the territorial and economic benefits. Not only did the Palestinian Leadership reject the plan because it did not serve the immediate interests of the political elite in Fatah and Hamas. Their interest do not represent the opinions of many Palestinian citizens and further points to the widening divisions among the political elite and general public.

If Fatah and Hamas cannot even compromise on a plan of governance for Gaza and the West Bank, it will be impossible for Fatah and Hamas to reconcile and negotiate a peace plan together—especially when it requires cooperating with Israelis in many security and economic sectors. Hamas views Israel as its sworn enemy and has carried out countless violent terrorist attacks to “eliminate the Jewish people.” The Fatah leadership, which is more political and works with the Israeli government in a limited capacity via the West Bank, still labels Israel as the “Zionist occupier” that should be “removed from the Holy Lands.” Neither Fatah nor Hamas leaders would be willing to coexist with Israel, because it contradicts their nationalist ideologies.

In this vein, the peace plan's proposal to demilitarize Hamas and trust that it would voluntarily stop its violent attacks against Israel is much too idealistic to actually manifest. Hamas is only able to maintain its stranglehold through Fatah's vulnerabilities and the generous support from Qatar and Iran. And asking Hamas to put down their weapons and submit to Israeli security forces will ultimately prove to be ineffective. The United States, Israel, and Arab leaders should not trust Hamas, especially as its popularity is on the rise in Gaza and the West Bank.

Now, setting an ultimatum of four years for the Palestinian leadership to start negotiations is not viable. This issue cannot wait for the current Palestinian leadership to change their mind. All parties must make peace a priority, focusing instead on bringing the right leaders to the table. International actors, think tankers, and decision-makers in the United States and the Middle East should pool their resources to inform and lobby political leadership, especially Palestinian leadership, towards more congenial solutions. The 2020 Palestinian elections for the

presidency and the Palestinian Legislative Council, if held, would be a good starting point to bring in new voices, outside the Fatah-Hamas dichotomy.

With the potential for new elections, albeit highly unlikely after the announcement of the Trump peace plan, Israel should also call on its Arab-Israeli population—especially Arab-Israelis serving in the Knesset or other high-profile positions in the Israeli government—to start establishing ties with liberal and moderate Palestinian political groups. This cooperation will aim to educate the Palestinian public, delegitimize the current Fatah-Hamas leadership, as well as empower the Palestinian public to vote for peace-oriented leaders—thus increasing the likelihood of reaching a lasting agreement between all parties.

To make this peace a reality, Hamas must be forced to fully demilitarize and give up its armed militias in Gaza. The United States must also pressure Qatar, one of its closest allies, to cut funding to Hamas and other terrorist organizations in the Gaza strip. The use of violence to protest peace must be internationally condemned, not just for Israeli interests, but for Palestinians as well. ❖

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