

Trump's Mideast Plan Represents a Deep Paradigm Shift. What Should Israel Do Next?

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Articles & Testimony

The proposal could create a powerful new point of reference for any future Israeli leader, but it must not be adopted as a rigid operative blueprint.

President Donald Trump's peace plan represents a deep paradigm shift from every prior attempt since 1993—most of which I was actively involved in—to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a plan that could influence critical elements of Israel's national security, it deserves to be the subject of public deliberation going beyond the tumult of an election campaign.

The paradigm that guided Israel in prior negotiations was that this is a conflict between two national movements with contradictory claims (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israeli-palestinian-conflict-solutions>) and historical narratives over the same slice of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. One cannot ignore the demographic reality, nor should one assume that the Palestinians will throw away their own narrative. Therefore, if Israel wishes to ensure its future as a Jewish and democratic state, it should strive to create a new reality—one mutually agreed-upon, not imposed—based on political separation and a division of the West Bank.

This new reality has to overcome the historical narratives, strike a balance between Israel's critical security needs and Palestinian political aspirations, and bring about an end of conflict. Various Israeli prime ministers have struck their desirable balance on various points differently than each other, yet all of them (including Benjamin Netanyahu) entered negotiations on the basis of this paradigm.

Now, for the first time, in consultation with Israel, the United States is presenting a detailed plan (<https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/TAG-Trump-Mideast-plan-1.5599155>) with a map to fully resolve all the core issues—and it comes down unequivocally on the side of the Jewish national movement's historical narrative. It definitively decides not only the issue of the needs of each party to the agreement, but also the question of who is

right. It addresses not only issues created by the 1967 Six-Day War (the “67 file”) but also those emerging from the 1948 War (the “48 file”), including reconsideration of the 1949 armistice lines. It reconfigures both the post-1948 and post-1967 territories and, as a historical correction, proposes (theoretically) that some areas inhabited by Arab-Israeli citizens (the “Triangle”) **be transferred to the new Palestinian state (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-with-israeli-citizenship-at-risk-in-deal-of-the-century-these-arabs-feel-betrayed-1.8478748>)**.

The Trump administration argues that the old paradigm has failed and, therefore, **a new paradigm is required (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-oslo-vs-trump-how-u-s-mideast-plan-differs-from-all-others-1.8468611>)**. Indeed, to the best of my judgment, we were never really close to a breakthrough that would lead to a final-status agreement; we never fully succeeded in bridging the gaps on even one of the core issues.

This space is too short to analyze why that occurred. Regardless, after more than 25 years of failure, we’ve now reached the point where I cannot see the parties having any chance to merge their minimum demands into an agreement that would resolve the core issues and end the conflict and all mutual claims. Meanwhile, both sides have moved even farther from an agreement—in their physical and political realities as well as in their perceptions.

It’s true that one shouldn’t sanctify an old paradigm that didn’t work, and it’s appropriate to reconsider our basic assumptions. But is the Trump plan the right alternative paradigm for Israel? We must first answer several preliminary questions.

Does the Trump plan give Israel practical means to meet its security needs in a post-agreement reality? Yes, absolutely. The Palestinian state will be effectively demilitarized. Israel will have overriding security responsibility for the entire territory and control over the Jordan Valley. It will also control the airspace, sea space, electromagnetic spectrum, and more.

We’ve had serious arguments about many of these items in the past, not just with the Palestinians but also with our American friends. Now, for the first time, a U.S. administration has fully accepted **the most expansive Israeli version of security arrangements in an agreement (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-the-trump-plan-s-vision-for-the-palestinians-israel-s-security-slave-1.8474741>)**.

Nevertheless, the plan raises quite a few serious questions. Israel is required to compensate the Palestinians for the 30 percent of the West Bank allotted to it by the plan with “reasonably comparable” territorial swaps. The basis for this calculation is 100 percent of the territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which were held by Jordan and Egypt, respectively, until 1967. Doing the calculation based on the peace plan’s map shows that the territorial swaps will be in a ratio of roughly 2:1 in Israel’s favor. This means that Israel will have to give Palestine a significant chunk of territory equivalent to more than twice the size of Gaza. Most will be in the Negev, near the Egyptian border.

Here are some of the questions that invite a public, strategic debate: Why is annexing dozens of isolated settlements and creating a series of sovereign enclaves within the territory of Palestine (when the Israel Defense Forces will anyway have overriding security responsibility for the entire territory) more important than retaining territory in the Negev, which gives Israel strategic depth and serves as the IDF’s main training ground? What does it mean to create and maintain a new Israeli-Palestinian border (open? closed?) that will be more than 1,300 kilometers (nearly 810 miles) long? What does it mean to have dozens of Palestinian enclaves in Israeli territory and 15 Israeli enclaves in Palestinian territory? Moreover, is applying sovereignty the only solution for safeguarding each and every Israeli interest? And where does the balance lie between the advantages of putting certain territory under Israeli sovereignty, and the disadvantages of opening the door to citizenship for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians living in that territory?

CAN TRUMP’S PLAN BE A BASIS FOR NEGOTIATIONS?

I can't see any Palestinian leader who would agree to negotiate on the basis of a plan that conditions Palestinian statehood on a list of criteria, some of which sound to Palestinian ears like surrendering their own narrative; others (demilitarizing Gaza) have zero chance of being met; and still others (a high standard of democracy and human rights) don't currently exist in any Arab country.

And beyond all these obstacles, the Palestinians see a **shrunk, divided state surrounded by an Israeli envelope** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/settlements-and-solutions>), with a capital in some peripheral neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. The billions of dollars promised the Palestinians by the plan won't sweeten the pill for them; this promise may even have the opposite effect. The Trump plan is thus rejected by **the vast majority of the Palestinian public (as indicated by opinion polls)** (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/poll-94-of-palestinians-reject-trump-s-plan-support-for-armed-struggle-on-rise-1.8527500>), and any Palestinian leader who might succeed President Mahmoud Abbas—the last of the generation of the Palestinian national movement's founders, who is focused on his patently inglorious legacy—will be obliged to consolidate his position by declaring war on it.

If the Trump plan isn't a platform for negotiations, then of what use might it be? The answer to that will obviously be influenced by the results of the upcoming elections in both Israel and America. But in any case, it's reasonable to believe the plan will leave a mark by creating a new, powerful point of reference for any future Israeli leader.

At least in the short term, Israel has a decisive ability to influence how the situation develops. It enjoys unprecedented support from a friendly U.S. administration and benefits from the winds of nationalism that are blowing worldwide and reopening old territorial conventions (like Russia in Crimea and India in Kashmir); the historic nadir to which the Palestinian national movement has fallen; and the rather cold shoulder the Arab world is giving the Palestinians, which heralds a tectonic regional shift.

On this basis, Israel could choose to embark on unilateral annexation in the West Bank—from which it has refrained for 53 years. This could involve anything from annexing certain parts of the territory to realizing the whole Land of Israel vision. Will this serve Israel's long-term security and its future as a Jewish and democratic state?

Annexation supporters respond to warnings about the evident potential negative implications (closing the door to an agreement; undermining the security situation in the territories; undermining Jordan and Israel's critical relationship with it; slowing normalization with Arab states; fueling an international delegitimization campaign against Israel, and more) by arguing that even if some of these come true, they are overcome by a one-time historic opportunity to secure vital Israeli interests that we mustn't miss—and, ultimately, the world will come to terms with it. In any case, they add, there's no Palestinian partner for an agreement under Israeli consensus conditions and the Palestinians shouldn't be rewarded for rejectionism. Since they already have and are further offered an autonomous entity where they hold citizenship, vote and maintain a separate community life, the sting has been removed from the danger of sliding into a binational state.

Notwithstanding the merit of some of these arguments, unilateral implementation of the plan may well prove a slippery slope that could lead to a dangerous, unstable reality. What follows is a scenario that's no less realistic than the optimistic one:

Israeli annexation measures will signal to the entire world that Israel is closing the door on separating through an agreement and is moving to unilaterally redefine the arena of the conflict. This message, in time, may well push the Palestinians to redefine the arena in the direction of one state with equal rights for all—and at some point, they may win significant international support for this. Even today, **there is broad sympathy for this idea** (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/abbas-puts-one-state-solution-on-the-table-1.5452672>) among young Palestinians, and it will grow.

In such a situation, there's no guarantee that the Palestinian Authority will continue to exist. Over time, both the PA and the Palestinian "islands" in the territories may well collapse into the Israeli envelope, thereby augmenting the demographic and political challenges for Israel. Pressure for a binational reality won't necessarily come solely from above; it will be fed by a bottom-up push; a sample of which is already evidenced by the Palestinian influx into areas of Jerusalem under Israeli control. And we haven't even mentioned the consequences of the mutual interaction between Palestinians from the territories and Arab Israelis, both treated by the Trump plan as one unit.

One can argue about the chances of such a nightmare scenario coming true, but it's impossible to dismiss. Doesn't a gamble like this over Israel's future justify a referendum?

Israel must not adopt the Trump plan as a rigid operative blueprint. It should work to stabilize the fluid situation on the ground, frame the plan as a platform for separating rather than intermingling, and aspire to do this cautiously and gradually, all while protecting its security interests and assets, and preferably in the framework of regional understandings. After all, the wisest of all men warned us in Ecclesiastes against the "riches kept for the owner thereof to his hurt."

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