

# We Need a Corrective to Old Catechisms on Peace. Trump's Plan Isn't It

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

**The best ideas in the plan will be delegitimized by its overall failure, because on each count the administration has stretched a laudable principle beyond recognition.**

**T**his past May, after hosting a nationally televised conversation with White House Senior Advisor Jared Kushner, I warned [in these pages \(https://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/05/10/jared-kushners-peace-plan-would-be-a-disaster/\)](https://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/05/10/jared-kushners-peace-plan-would-be-a-disaster/) that the Middle East peace plan being devised by the White House stood little chance of success and that it would be irresponsible for the Trump administration to release it. I offered a long list of reasons:

- that tabling a “bridging offer” for a final resolution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians only makes sense when the parties are within a certain zone of potential agreement, not when—as is currently the case—the chasm is so wide that no conceivable Solomonic solution exists;
- that the “real estate” approach adopted by the President’s son-in-law, based on making a lowball offer to the Palestinians to soften them up for a deal, failed to account for the Ramallah leadership’s time-honored tradition of celebrating defiance and rejection;
- that a proposal based on the idea that economic incentives can substitute for common-sense attributes of sovereignty like control over land, borders, and internal security misreads a century of Palestinian history;
- that a plan that doesn’t begin with the premise that the two sides have a rocky but resilient 26-year experience of cohabitation under the Oslo framework risks jettisoning the benefits of that relationship with no certainty of a better one emerging;
- that the pursuit of what will universally be viewed as a zero-sum-game outcome—even if successful in the short-run—

is a myopic approach to peacemaking because the parties are fated to live cheek-by-jowl forever. While this does not mean Israel has to meekly assent to everything Palestinians want to achieve, I wrote, “it does mean the conflict will never truly end unless each side believes the other has made a good-faith effort to reconcile its needs to the desires of the other side.”

On top of all these reasons, I was particularly worried about the Trump peace plan for another, somewhat counterintuitive reason—namely, that its failure would delegitimize its best ideas. Yes, I imagined, the plan was likely to include some very laudable concepts that could serve as a useful corrective to the tired catechism of so many useless international resolutions and foreign ministry declarations over the years. But, I feared, the near-certainty of failure would not, as the plan’s authors and advocates might argue, leave the proposal as the new reference point for future negotiations but rather would make even the best ideas in the plan radioactive for future peacemaking efforts.

Let me focus here on this last list of fears. The plan issued by the President included four excellent ideas, principles that deserve to be a fixture of all U.S. efforts to resolve this conflict. They are:

1. An affirmation that the ultimate path to peace lies in the concept of separation, what an earlier generation of diplomatic cartographers called “partition” and what we now call the “two-state solution.” This position is a powerful repudiation of the misnomer called a “one-state solution,” different versions of which are advocated by irredentist anti-Zionists and maximalist uber-Zionists, neither of which would lead to anything resembling peace. This is a big shift for the administration: there was a time when President Trump refused to endorse the “two-state” idea and Kushner, in our public conversation last May, declined to say the word “state” at all.
2. A recognition that the Jordan Valley, not some arbitrary “Green Line” boundary left over from the fluke of battlefield deployments in 1949, should be recognized as Israel’s natural security border.
3. A reflection of the demographic reality that peace cannot be premised on the forced repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Israeli settlers from communities in the West Bank back inside pre-1967 Israel.
4. A clear statement that the solution of the Palestinian refugee problem lies in return of refugees to the new state of Palestine, not in keeping alive fantasies about the refugees’ alleged “right of return” to Israel.

For including these four principles within the plan, the Trump initiative actually deserves great credit. But it will get very little, because on each count, the plan stretches the laudable principles beyond recognition, denuding them of much practical value and undermining the benefits of including them in the first place. Specifically:

1. The “two-state” solution offered by the Trump plan requires the Palestinians to forgo most generally recognized aspects of sovereignty. It goes far beyond the creation of a “demilitarized” state to deny them, in perpetuity, such rights as control over entry and exit and internal security. It even grants Israel the right to reclaim powers and authorities given to Palestine at any point in the future. While numerous independent states voluntarily repudiate pieces of sovereignty in their constitutions, one would be hard-pressed to find many born with their sovereignty so circumscribed and so reversible.
2. While it is a major step forward to recognize the Jordan Valley as vital for Israel’s security, it is a huge leap to allot the entire area to Israel as sovereign territory. Very few Israelis live in the Valley; security issues could have been addressed instead by giving Israel some creative combination of unfettered access, military deployments, and a veto-wielding role in the management of border crossings. However, the plan makes no effort to seek a reasonable compromise that accounts both for Israeli security needs and Palestinian political interests and instead makes the Jordan Valley a total win for Israel and total loss for Palestine.
3. Demographic realism is welcome, but ruling out the removal of hundreds of thousands of Israeli settlers is a far cry from ruling out the removal of even one, as the plan calls for. It would have been an historic step if the Trump plan endorsed Israel annexing the settlements west of the West Bank security barrier, containing 77 percent of all settlers.

But the Trump plan makes as sovereign Israeli territory **every Israeli settlement**

**(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/continuity-vs.-overreach-in-the-trump-peace-plan-part-1-borders-and-jerusal>)**, including 62 settlements—with more than 100,000 Israelis—east of the barrier, some in the middle of Palestinian population centers. Far more than demographic realism, this is a recipe for perpetual friction and interminable conflict.

4. As for refugees, one should applaud a proposal that rules out return to Israel and envisions a solution solely in terms of potential return to the new state of Palestine, some other agreeable state, or receiving financial compensation. But even the plan's details circumscribe the practical value of these principles. According to its terms, Israel will **control the overall number of refugees** (**(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/continuity-vs.-overreach-in-the-trump-peace-plan-part-2-security-refugees-a>)**) that can return to Palestine and prevent the entry of individual refugees. Moreover, the plan offers only the vaguest reference to compensation, suggesting that the real financial benefits to refugees will come in the overall implementation of the economic investment section of the plan, which itself comes with no details of financing or a roadmap for implementation.

Predictably enough, it took less than a week for Arab and Muslim states—including the Trump administration's closest partners in the Middle East—to reject the plan in the clearest and most vociferous terms. Thus, the White House actually succeeded in retarding a positive trend—growing regional indifference to the Palestinian cause—and replacing it with across-the-board Arab and Muslim support for the most rejectionist sentiments of a tired, increasingly illegitimate Palestinian leadership. Things started well for the White House, which convinced three Arab Ambassadors to attend Trump's ceremony with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu marking the release of the plan, including one—the envoy from the United Arab Emirates—who praised the proposal as a “serious initiative” and an “important starting point” for a return to negotiations. But within days, old patterns reemerged, as the Arab League meeting in Cairo and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation meeting in Jeddah issued stinging rejections of the plan and strong endorsements of the traditional Palestinian position. While none of this is likely to affect the important business Washington has with Arab and Muslim governments—fighting terror, confronting Iran—such negativity to the Trump plan bursts the bubble of those who suggested that the Palestinians were so isolated that they would be forced to accept the less-than-half-loaf on offer. To call the rollout strategy, if one existed, less than a stunning success is an understatement.

In the meantime, many Israelis may enjoy the sugar-high of President Trump's warm embrace, but they don't seem prepared for the inevitable let-down to come. In so doing they mistake the ebb and flow of U.S. recognition of their desiderata with actual peace with the Palestinians. It is one thing for the President to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, a bilateral U.S.-Israel decision I supported as a long-overdue remedy for an historic wrong of U.S. policy. It is something else for the President to be the mediator in someone else's dispute and offer detailed views on its resolution that tilt heavily to the views of one side, even if that side is a strong and close ally.

In a 2004 exchange of letters, President George W. Bush affirmed to then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that the U.S. government recognized that a substantial portion of Israeli settlers would be allowed to stay in their homes and communities, annexed to Israel, in any future peace agreement: “In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers,” wrote Bush, “it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949.” It was an historic recognition of reality and, in my view, a major step toward building a practical peace. However, five years later, when Barack Obama became President, he decided he wasn't bound by his predecessor's written commitment and essentially ripped up the letter and started from scratch. The absence of any progress toward peace since then is at least partly a legacy of that decision.

If that is what happened when a new President inherited a fairly mild policy declaration he believed tied his hands,

there should be no doubt what is going to happen when a future President of a different party inherits the more unabashedly “pro-Israel” positions proposed by the Trump peace plan. He or she will almost surely renounce what Trump proposed and face a decision as to whether to issue his/her own peace plan or to return to the role played by every President since Ronald Reagan, that of honest broker helping the parties work out their differences in direct negotiations. If we are lucky, the old ways will win out, because the alternative is likely to be a plan based on principles less rational and reasoned than the kernels of sanity that ended up stretched beyond recognition in the Trump plan. And the sugar-high will be a distant memory.

It remains to be said: After a century of conflict, one must admit the possibility that the Venn diagram of Israeli-Palestinian peace may not exist. That is, there may be no overlap between what Palestinians will accept and what Israelis will offer. Traditionally, the main reason for the absence of peace has been Palestinian rejectionism, their refusal of every partition plan since 1937. That has not changed, though the Trump plan is not really a fair test. More recently, Israel hardened its own position, thanks both to the lessons learned from the stab-in-the-back it suffered during the second *intifada* and the giddiness released by the President’s indulgence of the most triumphalist tendencies in Israeli politics. The result is that the gap between the two sides has become a chasm.

Perhaps, a day will come when the centers of gravity of Israeli and Palestinian politics move closer to each other and an American mediator—one who is surely sympathetic to Israel but who also projects understanding of Palestinian concerns—can help them span the remaining divide. Until then, the goal of U.S. policy should be clear—to continue the historic march of shrinking the conflict from a meta-contest between Arabs and Israelis to a managed dispute between two peoples uneasily sharing the same tiny sliver of land on the eastern Mediterranean.

*Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the American Interest website (<https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/02/05/we-need-a-corrective-to-old-catechisms-on-peace-trumps-plan-isnt-it/>). ❖*

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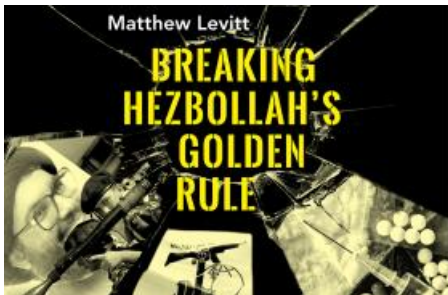
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