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Continuity vs. Overreach in the Trump Peace Plan (Part 2): Security, Refugees, and Narratives

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Brief Analysis

By granting Israel much more say over the sovereignty of a future Palestinian state and its ability to absorb refugees, the document may undermine the administration's ability to build an international coalition behind its policies.

President Trump's "Peace to Prosperity" plan was presented as a departure from previous approaches—a notion that invited praise from its supporters (who saw it as a recognition of reality) and criticism from its opponents (who saw it as an abandonment of valued principles). The plan does in fact diverge from past efforts in fundamental respects, yet there are also some areas of continuity, and ultimately, the extent to which it gains traction will be subject to many different political and diplomatic variables.

Even so, the initial substance of the [plan document itself](#) will play a large part in determining how it is viewed by various stakeholders, especially those passages that veer away from the traditional path on core issues. [Part 1 of this PolicyWatch](#) assessed what the plan says about two such issues: borders and Jerusalem. This second installment discusses security, refugee, and narrative issues.

ISRAELI PERMANENCE ON SECURITY

Previous peace initiatives sought to strike a balance between preserving Israel's security interests and minimally infringing on Palestinian sovereignty. To do so, two sets of provisions were considered. The first were permanent provisions to ensure that the Palestinian state would not become a threat to Israel. This meant creating a

demilitarized state and establishing permanent arrangements to ensure that it remains in compliance with this demilitarization and other security obligations. These arrangements were to be based on a proposed third-party presence, with a possible Israeli component.

The second type of provisions were transitional measures intended to preserve Israel's security interests during implementation of the final agreement. Phased, multi-year timetables were presented for the removal of Israeli security control, with the understanding that key Israeli security needs (e.g., authority over a strip of land along the Jordan River) would be the last measures lifted. The transition phase was foreseen as a mix of timetables and performance benchmarks; the United States agreed to help determine when these benchmarks were met.

Palestinian negotiators accepted a demilitarized state during past talks, a fact that is now openly acknowledged by Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas; they also engaged in detailed discussions on operationalizing this concept. For their part, Israeli negotiators engaged with proposals that would have eventually ended most of their country's security presence in the future Palestinian state. Such talks often centered on the length of the transitional phases—Palestinian representatives demanded shorter ones, while Israelis insisted on longer timetables and a more permanent presence along the Jordan River.

The Trump plan's adoption of a demilitarized Palestinian state continues this established American position. Yet it fundamentally departs from past U.S. views on the permanence of Israeli security control over the Palestinian state. Most notably, it grants Israel "overriding security responsibility over the State of Palestine" and makes it "responsible for security at all international crossings" (Appendix 2c). In effect, this means Israel could conduct any military or security operations within Palestine's borders and airspace in perpetuity, as well as prohibit the entry of goods and people. Israel has also been granted sole discretion over determining when the Palestinian state has met performance benchmarks for partial transfer of security authorities; it can even reverse these steps at will.

Palestinian officials have already criticized these provisions, noting that while the PA is willing to accept certain limitations on sovereignty, the future state envisioned in the Trump plan would have no sovereignty at all. The Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation adopted this same argument at separate meetings over the past few days.

ISRAELI DISCRETION OVER REFUGEES

All previous U.S. plans envisioned a solution for the Palestinian refugee issue consistent with the idea of two states for two peoples. For the most part, the issue was to be resolved not in Israel, but through resettlement in Palestine, with some third-party options available based on the sovereign discretion of the states in question. These resettlement efforts were to be accompanied by a compensation scheme for individual refugees, the Palestinian state, and host states, thereby facilitating buy-in from each of them.

Past Israeli negotiating teams were consistently adamant in rejecting any right of refugees to move to Israel. Yet they were occasionally willing to discuss admitting symbolic numbers on a humanitarian or other nonbinding basis.

On the Palestinian side, the refugee issue has generated more divergence between public statements and private negotiating positions than any other issue. Publicly, PA officials consistently demand full implementation of the right of return. Even when signaling flexibility, they use vague formulas such as the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative's call for a "just and agreed" solution on refugees. During closed-door negotiations, however, Palestinian representatives have been willing to discuss allowing only a limited number of refugees to settle in Israel—though they never completely relinquished the right of return, and their proposed numbers always far exceeded what Israeli negotiators were willing to entertain.

The Trump plan is consistent with previous American ideas insofar as it does not envision a solution for the refugee problem inside Israel. Yet it diverges in two significant ways.

First, while stating that absorption into Palestine is the first option for refugees, it places restrictions that make this option dependent on Israeli decisions. Israel is granted the right to prevent individual refugees it deems a security threat from entering the new state. It also has a say in how many refugees are permitted to enter, based on passages like this one: “The rate of movement of refugees...into the State of Palestine shall be agreed by the parties” (p. 33).

Second, the new plan focuses more on state-level refugee compensation than individual compensation. It also indicates that only one host country—Jordan—is entitled to such compensation, excluding other potential hosts. Moreover, the monies presented as part of the refugee package will actually be integrated into the Trump Economic Plan’s generalized assistance fund, not treated as a separate fund. Under this approach, these monies will lose their political value as an incentive for host countries to support the plan’s proposed refugee solution.

FAVORING ISRAEL’S NARRATIVE?

Besides offering policy prescriptions for resolving specific issues, the new U.S. plan extensively covers narrative issues that have traditionally been left out of previous initiatives. Early attempts to negotiate such issues—such as drafting a joint narrative about the events of 1948 or historical ties to Jerusalem—proved unsuccessful given the often-contradictory nature of the two national narratives. Over time, this led most negotiators to avoid addressing these issues during direct talks.

In contrast, the very manner in which the Trump plan is presented seems to construct a deliberate narrative framework, despite the document’s correct argument that “Reciting past narratives about the conflict is unproductive” (p. 6). Both its overall framing and its treatment of certain issues reflects a specific understanding of the history and narratives surrounding the conflict.

This approach will probably have little effect on any efforts to implement the new initiative, but it could hurt the plan’s marketability. The document’s narrative will surely reinforce the Palestinian sense of imbalance, since the text is more compatible with an Israeli narrative and in some cases directly dismisses the Palestinian narrative (e.g., on p. 31, where Palestinian refugees are described as “pawns” who have been “cynically held in limbo”). It also paints the past policies of some Arab countries in a negative light, which could reduce the chances that these governments will support the plan—including some countries that seemed open to considering the initiative when it was first announced. For example, the description of Palestinian “clearing” by post-liberation Kuwait (p. 31) can only alienate the current Kuwaiti government, whose support will be needed politically and economically.

CONCLUSION

Innovative approaches to the Middle East peace process are needed. Past failures have created a sense of resignation, and new ideas can inject energy into the moribund process.

Yet any new approach must also consider that past approaches were not simply products of ideology or recalcitrance—they also reflected genuine interests expressed by each party and other stakeholders. By radically departing from certain key tenets seen in previous initiatives, the Trump administration may have undermined its ability to build an international coalition in support of its plan. This was on clear display at the aforementioned Arab League and OIC meetings, and will probably continue to shape the diplomatic discourse in days to come.

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