

A Steep Uphill Climb: Why Trump's New Mideast Peace Plan Will Likely Harden the Israeli-Palestinian Divide

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Feb 2, 2020

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

As currently constituted, the plan cannot be accepted by any Palestinian who cares about self-determination, but implementing some of its economic provisions might create room for negotiations down the road.

I recently wrote a book about moral courage in politics, as seen throughout Israeli history. Co-written with David Makovsky, it's called "Be Strong and of Good Courage." We focus heavily on the role of leaders for one fundamental reason: If Israel stays on its current path, it will become one state for two people.

When one state is the only outcome that can be discussed, Palestinians will say, "Fine: one state, one person; one person, one vote." No one will be able to argue with the moral logic of that statement. BDS will appear like child's play at that point, and those seeking to delegitimize Israel will be given a great boost.

The answer we provide in the book to this looming possibility is for Israel to stop building outside of the settlement blocs—preserving the option of physical separation from the Palestinians in the form of two states. This is logical, especially with 77% of the Israeli settlers living in the bloc areas that are close to the pre-Six Day War Green Line and the major urban centers in Israel, but it's hard politically, because the settler movement, which is as passionate as movements come, will oppose any such limitation on settlement building.

Our book offers in-depth biographic profiles of four Israeli leaders: David Ben-Gurion, Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon. They were different ideologically but all viewed leadership the same way. They believed the real challenges of the state needed to be addressed, not avoided. They put the state and not their politics first. They felt the need to lead the public and not follow it—and thus understood the need to educate Israelis about stakes.

All of this is of immediate and unfortunately depressing relevance to the current moment and the Trump peace plan announced last week. At one level, it is surely good that the Trump plan calls for two states. It is good that Israeli

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his political party, Likud, have now for the first time formally adopted a position accepting a two-state outcome.

The bad news is that the Trump plan as constituted could not be accepted by any Palestinian who cares about self-determination. Palestinians understandably see several poison pills in the plan.

First, it provides for a state in only 60% of the West Bank—an area populated by 2.5 million Palestinians—with Israel getting 40% of the territory. To make matters worse, the 60% is also divided and not geographically contiguous; look close at the **conceptual map (<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1222224528065155072>)** being touted by the president to see just how chopped up it is. No country can long exist in such a tattered condition.

Second, the reason for the division is the incorporation of 62 settlements outside the most densely populated blocs I mentioned above. These settlements carve up the 60% of the territory the Palestinians would receive.

The plan could have shrunk the size of such settlements by no longer building outside the blocs and providing financial incentives for those Israelis living in them to leave—or, if they chose to remain, to do so as citizens of the Palestinian state. Instead, the opposite is being done: These settlements will remain part of Israel and be permitted to expand—necessitating that the Palestinian areas must be broken up. True, the plan is designed to permit Palestinians to travel to the disconnected parts of their state in the West Bank by tunnels and overpasses, but the psychology of being segmented into small areas will be hard to overcome for Palestinians and Arab leaders.

Third, the Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem will be under Israeli sovereignty. The Palestinians are provided parts of neighborhoods (Kufr Aqab and Shuafat) that are separated from all the Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem by a wall. The area is a kind of no-man's land that few consider to be East Jerusalem.

Fourth, the Palestinian state in the West Bank will be surrounded by Israel. Completely. Look again at the map. It will not have a border with Jordan. This means all Palestinian movement into and out of their state will still be controlled by Israel. For Palestinians—and not only Mahmoud Abbas—these and other elements of the plan render it unacceptable.

Under its vision, Israel is the sole arbiter of when the Palestinians meet their obligations; Israel determines whether Palestinian refugees can return to the Palestinian state; and Israel is permitted to unilaterally implement what they get in the plan while Palestinians get nothing until they fulfill all obligations including the demilitarization of Hamas in Gaza. So of course Abbas rejected the plan, calling it the “slap of the century.”

Palestinian rejection is not new. The Clinton parameters in 2000, the Olmert offer in 2008, and the Obama principles in 2014 were either rejected or simply not answered—and all of them would have been dramatically more favorable than the Trump plan to the Palestinians. Indeed, all of them would have provided a state in which Palestinians received most of the West Bank minus settlement blocs in the roughly 5% close to the Green Line where nearly four-fifths of all the settlers live.

Palestinian rejection is not surprising; the absence of Arab rejection is. The key Arab states—Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Morocco—did not embrace the plan but did not criticize it. Even though the details of the plan and its map were not shared with them in advance, and they found them wanting, they did not reject the plan. They simply did not comment on its content, and instead called for direct negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis.

I was sitting with an Arab official, and when he looked at the plan's map, he simply shook his head and said: “No one can say that looks like a state.” The irony is that he made it clear that his country and others were ready to say the plan was serious if they could point to elements that they could defend as serious.

For the first time, they did not follow the Palestinian lead and did not allow the Palestinians to determine what is acceptable. There is, just maybe, a ray of hope there.

When we presented the Clinton parameters in December of 2000 to the Israelis and Palestinians privately, we also conveyed them to the Egyptians, Saudis, Jordanians and others—and all agreed it was a good plan and privately urged the Palestinians to accept it. However, when Yasser Arafat rejected it, no Arab leader said a word. That was the pattern historically.

No longer: The Trump plan, as is, is not going to be a blueprint for resolution of the conflict. It was easy for the Palestinians to reject it.

But it is noteworthy both the administration and Likud are now accepting two states, and that key Arab states aren't willing to simply accept Palestinian rejectionism anymore. (That the Arab League did support Abbas' rejection is not surprising—it is a lowest common denominator organization—but even it called for direct talks.)

They want the conflict to end. Given that, it's tempting to imagine what might have happened if the plan had been more credible and had the administration shared its details in advance with key Arab leaders, taken some of their comments, and worked out with them word for word what they would say in response to it.

In those circumstances, they would have been willing to say the plan was a serious basis for negotiations. The Europeans, who will not be more Arab than the Arabs, would likely have said the same thing. Palestinians, then, would have found it difficult to reject a plan that their historic supporters were calling serious.

Regrettably, that is not where we are. Instead, we face the very real risk that the plan will go nowhere even as Israel annexes 40% of the West Bank—making one state, not two, the outcome, which will ultimately be bad for both parties.

So what can be done—especially given this revolutionary reality of the Arabs no longer letting the Palestinians be the sole arbiter of peace with Israel? Start with sticking to what Trump said about the plan: He called it a vision that should be a basis for negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. A vision by definition is not fixed in concrete; it can be adjusted.

Moreover, he provided a four-year window for the Palestinians to negotiate on the vision, acknowledging they would reject it initially but would have time to reflect on it and come around. If there truly is a window, then make clear there can be no unilateral implementation of the vision's provisions—meaning no annexation—for the duration of the four-year period. After all, if this is supposed to be negotiated, how can one side unilaterally go ahead and preempt the possibility of reaching an understanding?

Annexation will not only give lie to there being a real four-year window, it will lose the Arabs. They will not be able to be silent in the face of Israeli annexation; they will be forced back into following the Palestinian lead.

That is a huge mistake. It is precisely the understanding on the Palestinian part that they could lose Arab, European and international backing that could finally lead them to alter their behavior and accept a plan that could be possible.

But there is something more that should be done with the Trump plan. Why not at least begin collectively to work on the economic part of the plan designed to allow the Palestinians to build a prosperous state?

The provisions in the plan requiring economic reform, institution building, investment in infrastructure, developing capital markets, producing jobs, would all be necessary if there were to be an eventual Palestinian state. Work on them now would change the climate and create a sense of hope and possibility among Palestinians—and that, too, could make them far more amenable to negotiating an outcome. It would also be novel because the Palestinian public would see their own leadership was putting their well-being, not time-worn slogans first.

Yes, it will require Israeli leaders to accept that they won't implement the plan unilaterally but will permit some of the economic goods to be provided to the Palestinians upfront. Once again, we will need to see leaders in Israel who

can be strong and of good courage.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the New York Daily News website (<https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-a-steep-uphill-climb-20200202-nrfamph5crgyhhrozhlsqhsq-story.html>). ❖

New York Daily News

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



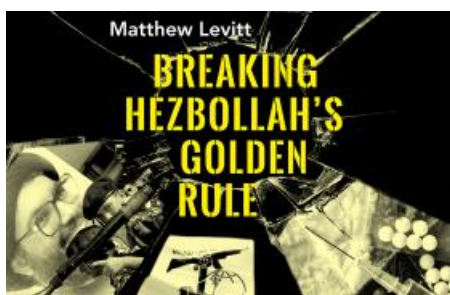
BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)