

Revealed at Last: Trump's Israeli-Palestinian Peace Deal to End All Peace

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Despite the applause in some quarters, the plan may wind up fostering tense conditions that are ripe for Palestinian violence.

After several years and much speculation, President Donald Trump's "Deal of the Century" for Israeli-Palestinian peace was unveiled Tuesday at the White House. Despite the moniker, it's neither a deal to end the world's longest-running conflict nor a way to achieve peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The more likely scenario is that it does exactly the opposite, escalating tensions in the Holy Land leading to a possible violent Palestinian counter-reaction.

Standing beside a beaming and clapping Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump laid out the broad strokes of a plan that would see Israel maintain all of its settlements in the West Bank and control over all of Jerusalem and its holy sites. A future Palestinian state would encompass roughly 70 percent of the territory of the West Bank, but with it some 15 settlements-cum-enclaves that would dissect the state from north to south (in a map released by the U.S. team the 15 sites were termed "not all inclusive"). A Palestinian capital would be placed in "eastern Jerusalem," in villages beyond the Israeli security barrier; as Trump put it, "Jerusalem will remain Israel's undivided capital."

The conditions for Palestinian statehood are almost as long as the cheers from the partisan crowd arrayed at the White House. The Palestinians would have to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, including in its expanded borders, and the Islamist Hamas movement that controls the Gaza Strip would have to be disarmed and Gaza retaken, among many other stipulations. With good reason Netanyahu called it a "historic day," adding that the "Deal of the Century" is the opportunity of the century.

The Palestinian leadership has made clear since last year, and increasingly in recent days, that the U.S. initiative is "dead on arrival." Saeb Erekat, secretary-general of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said earlier today to CNN,

prior to the plan's release, that it wasn't the "Deal of the Century but the fraud of the century." A senior Palestinian official close to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas told The Daily Beast that Trump was "the American president who unleashed the Greater Israel project and killed the prospects for a two state solution."

The fact that the Middle East Peace Process now appears to be solely between Americans and Israelis—Netanyahu's main political rival Benny Gantz met with Trump yesterday—doesn't seem to have fazed the U.S. administration. "The U.S. plan shows almost no regard for what Palestinians think," Khalil Shikaki, a prominent Palestinian pollster consulted by the Trump peace team, told The Daily Beast. "It's detached from reality...You can't reduce the entire issue to jobs."

U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman told reporters after the plan's release today, in a fit of faux largesse, that "it doesn't matter what the Palestinians say, we will keep the option [of Palestinian statehood] open for four years." Friedman went on to add that the areas of the West Bank earmarked for a Palestinian state would remain frozen during this time—"an important concession by Israel," he said—but that in return the U.S. would recognize Israel's annexation of the areas it would receive, including all the settlements and the strategic Jordan Valley. "Israel does not have to wait at all," Friedman added, "the delay is only dependent on internal Israeli processes."

For his part, Netanyahu in his speech said he would begin just such a process, likely as soon as next Sunday, which is where things may heat up both politically (in Israel) and on the ground (in the West Bank). After failing to win re-election twice over the past year, Netanyahu is headed to a third repeat election in early March. Throughout this time he has remained prime minister, albeit at the helm of a transition government. An Israeli government can annex territory through a simple cabinet decision; a transition government, on the other hand, will likely run up against severe legal limitations from the country's attorney general and supreme court, according to Dr. Amir Fuchs, a legal expert at the Israel Democracy Institute, a non-partisan think tank.

"The problem is a transition government—you cannot make any extreme decisions, certainly not those that aren't time sensitive," he told The Daily Beast. "The attorney general won't defend it in the face of legal challenges to the supreme court."

On the flip side, however, Netanyahu could take it to a vote in the Knesset. "That could work," Fuchs allowed. In that case, he would put Benny Gantz's Blue and White to a major test in the heat of an election campaign.

Gantz made clear again Tuesday evening that he's inclined to wait until after the election, stating that "in order for implementation [of the plan] to be possible, Israel must move forward toward a strong and stable government, led by an individual who can direct the fullness of his time and energy" to the running of the state. This was an allusion to Netanyahu's legal troubles, deepened further earlier today after the premier pulled his request for parliamentary immunity. The attorney general subsequently filed charges in court against Netanyahu for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust, officially making him a criminal defendant.

Netanyahu may figure that a Knesset vote against annexation will harm Gantz electorally among the soft right-wing voters Blue and White has attempted to poach. If the March election returns another deadlock between the two leaders, then the U.S. plan could form the basis—however unlikely—for a political partnership, possibly allowing Netanyahu to survive politically. "Peace transcends politics," Trump tellingly said in his speech after observing that Israeli politics has produced the "longest running election of all time."

Israeli politics aside, the real impact of Trump's gambit will likely be felt inside Palestinian politics. President Abbas tonight called an emergency meeting of the entire Palestinian leadership in Ramallah, the Palestinian Authority's de facto capital in the West Bank. In an unprecedented step, he also invited political representatives from his sworn enemies in Hamas and Islamic Jihad (and this, after a call with Hamas political chief Ismael Haniyeh).

According to reports coming out as of this writing, Abbas strongly rejected the U.S. plan, saying "Jerusalem is not for

sale, and all our rights are not for sale...and the [U.S.] conspiracy deal will not pass.” More ominously, Abbas vowed to change the functional role of the Palestinian Authority—established in 1993 after the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords—and that he would immediately begin implementation of past decisions taken by key Palestinian political bodies, ostensibly including the suspension of vital Israeli-Palestinian security coordination.

Abbas, to be sure, has made these threats before—yet his position now is more acute. Annexation of the West Bank by Israel would, in real terms on the ground, be a paradigm shift after over two decades of peace efforts (as the Trump administration intended). Abbas, 84, finds himself relatively isolated internationally; ambassadors from Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates even attended the Trump-Netanyahu cheer fest at the White House.

It is unclear if a meeting of Arab foreign ministers set for this Saturday in Cairo, which Abbas will attend, will produce the desired Palestinian response. The Egyptian government tonight reportedly urged both Israelis and Palestinians to “study” the American plan. “We expect all to stand up for their own vision and resolutions,” the senior Palestinian official told *The Daily Beast*, alluding to the Arab states and the international community’s past support for the well-established parameters of a two-state solution.

Worse still, for the past year and a half Israel has been indirectly negotiating with Hamas—an internationally recognized terrorist group—over a long-term truce deal in Gaza, in an effort to stop incessant rocket fire and border clashes.

“We are not a terrorist people...we are committed to fight terror,” Abbas said tonight. “But the world must understand that this people deserves a life.”

His main recourse to make Israel, the U.S., and the world understand is likely by mobilizing demonstrators to take to the streets of the West Bank. As part of its [coordination with Israeli forces](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-with-no-army-army-with-no-state) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-with-no-army-army-with-no-state>), the PA’s security forces often stop such demonstrations from coalescing and spilling over into sensitive seam zones—highways, checkpoints, settlements—between Palestinian and Israeli control.

Unconfirmed reports of recent days indicate Abbas may choose to go down this path, albeit with his security forces still stopping (as they have in the past) armed demonstrators. The more extreme option would be if Abbas mobilizes the popular militia of his Fatah movement, the Tanzim, long dormant since the Second Intifada (2000-2005). As one Israeli security official told *The Daily Beast* last year, if the Tanzim were ever mobilized again then Israel “would find itself in a new day.”

The Israeli military earlier today deployed an additional infantry brigade to the Jordan Valley, with reinforcements put on alert if needed in the West Bank. Hamas, in Gaza, will likely also attempt to escalate in a show of solidarity—and to shame Abbas if he ultimately backs down.

Netanyahu, in his remarks today, said he was open to “negotiating with the Palestinians on the basis of the [Trump] peace plan.” With Israel receiving nearly all of what it could ever wish for (and indeed more) in a peace deal, it’s unclear after today what will be left to negotiate—except possibly an end to yet another cycle of Israeli-Palestinian violence.

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