

Netanyahu's Government Fail Should Postpone Trump's Middle East Peace Plan. That's a Good Thing.

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Articles & Testimony

Palestinians heaved a sigh of relief when they saw Israel would hold new elections, and the United States would have more time to do the diplomatic work needed.

Even by the standards of Israel's famously tumultuous politics, [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's \(https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/historic-failure-netanyahu-can-t-form-new-government-israel-headed-n1011641\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/historic-failure-netanyahu-can-t-form-new-government-israel-headed-n1011641) unprecedented failure to form a government Wednesday, [triggering second round elections \(https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/israel-s-second-election-2019-will-feature-these-key-players-n1011811\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/israel-s-second-election-2019-will-feature-these-key-players-n1011811), is a seismic event. And it is not only Israeli voters who find themselves buffeted by the aftershocks.

While Israeli politics has been thrown into disarray and campaign posturing is scheduled to trounce policymaking until the [new vote on September 17 \(https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/30/world/middleeast/israel-elections-netanyahu.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/30/world/middleeast/israel-elections-netanyahu.html), the Trump administration will likely find itself equally stymied in any significant attempt to move forward with its [Middle East peace effort \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/kushner-arrives-in-israel-to-political-chaos-and-a-new-roadblock-for-his-peace-plan/2019/05/30/450df8c6-8249-11e9-b585-e36b16a531aa_story.html?utm_term=.cb698db8d4db\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/kushner-arrives-in-israel-to-political-chaos-and-a-new-roadblock-for-his-peace-plan/2019/05/30/450df8c6-8249-11e9-b585-e36b16a531aa_story.html?utm_term=.cb698db8d4db).

That is undoubtedly frustrating to the administration's peace team, headed by presidential advisor and [son-in-law Jared Kushner \(https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/jared-kushner-aims-build-support-deal-century-mideast-trip-n1011281\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/jared-kushner-aims-build-support-deal-century-mideast-trip-n1011281), which has been working on the plan for more than two years. But, to paraphrase political leaders at least as far back as Machiavelli, this is exactly the kind of crisis that should not be wasted.

Anxiety and concern have long been the watchwords for many in the Arab world and Europe as the administration has moved closer to an anticipated unveiling of the plan this summer. The collapse of the Israeli coalition talks may

well prove to be a blessing in disguise if it pushes back the deal's release and buys the administration time to overcome the serious flaws that threaten to produce a stillborn plan.

The **[Palestinian leadership has long made it clear \(https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Abbas-tells-donors-May-the-Deal-of-the-Century-go-to-hell-591180\)](https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Abbas-tells-donors-May-the-Deal-of-the-Century-go-to-hell-591180)** that it will reject the plan even before seeing it because of prior U.S. decisions it objects to, most notably moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem after unilaterally recognizing the contested city as Israel's capital last year. And though the administration initially received positive signals about the peace effort from some Arab countries eager not to displease Trump, their enthusiasm began waning as the launch date approached.

Part of the change in their attitude has to do with the substance of the plan itself—as in, they don't know what it is. Fearing leaks, which have sunk other peacemaking efforts as popular opposition mounted to prematurely publicized concessions, the administration has done a remarkable job ensuring full secrecy regarding the details of the plan. While reasonable and even commendable, this approach has made it impossible to form a coalition of Arab and European allies, who are understandably unwilling to commit to supporting a mystery.

The Arab states are particularly sensitive to the status of Jerusalem—the U.S. Embassy relocation didn't exactly reassure them that the plan's details, when revealed, would be to their liking—and are adamant, after **[Trump's repeated refusal to endorse \(https://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/trump-two-state-one-state-solution-israel-235054\)](https://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/trump-two-state-one-state-solution-israel-235054)** the two-state solution, that **[any plan should create a Palestinian state \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/saudi-king-reaffirms-support-palestinian-state-190212173444988.html\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/saudi-king-reaffirms-support-palestinian-state-190212173444988.html)**. In particular, Jordan, a key U.S. ally in implementing any peace deal, has expressed great concern that the deal may compromise Jordan's special role in Jerusalem and that the Jordanian public may react angrily to the plan.

Beyond what the proposal might theoretically say, there's also the issue of what we know to be happening in the region. The big picture is that some of the most powerful local actors—particularly the Gulf kingdoms—**[see containing Iran as the immediate regional priority \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-summit/saudi-arabia-says-firm-stand-needed-to-deter-iran-iraq-demurs-idUSKCN1T000C\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-summit/saudi-arabia-says-firm-stand-needed-to-deter-iran-iraq-demurs-idUSKCN1T000C)**. These countries don't want the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to once again hijack all regional diplomacy. The irritation was on full display this week as Saudi Arabia held three summits aimed at Iran but found itself having to dedicate time and resources to the Palestinian issue.

The smaller—but potentially more disruptive—picture is that the situation on the ground itself is becoming increasingly unstable. Progress is being made toward an **[Egyptian-brokered truce in Gaza \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/hamas-announces-egyptian-brokered-ceasefire-israel-190325193456277.html\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/hamas-announces-egyptian-brokered-ceasefire-israel-190325193456277.html)** between Hamas and Israel after numerous rounds of fighting and a mounting death toll. Yet there are likely to be more flare-ups (if not a major explosion) this summer. In the meantime, the humanitarian situation there remains on the precipice of collapse, demanding an immediate international response.

In the West Bank, a measure of security stability persists thanks to robust Palestinian-Israeli security cooperation. But the economy is deteriorating, and the Palestinian Authority is foundering, both because—after 25 years of negotiations—it has so far failed to produce a Palestinian state through diplomacy, and because of the widespread frustration with the Palestinian Authority's corruption and poor governance. Underneath the veneer of stability, unrest is bubbling in the West Bank.

Then there's Israel's contribution to the ferment. Some highly destabilizing ideas are moving from the margins to the mainstream, raising doubts about Israel's ability to conclude any deal. In recent months, Netanyahu himself floated the idea of annexing parts of the West Bank, a move that could create unrest on the ground, damage its peace

treaties with Egypt and Jordan, and rupture ties he's been cultivating with some Arab states. And the new elections mean that, even if Netanyahu retains his hold on power, he could be too weakened or pulled too much further to the right to take bold steps.

Given all this, the delay in releasing the peace plan provides an opportunity for the U.S. For one thing, it avoids making itself an element of instability by landing its plan in the middle of an already volatile landscape. And for another, the extra time can be used to improve its diplomatic position as well as the situation on the ground.

Trump's peace team needs to forgo some of its secrecy and, with the help of the State Department, share parts of the plan to build support among allies. This does not need to be widespread or comprehensive, but key actors need to know how issues of direct concern to them are addressed.

The U.S. outreach also has to be directed at bringing some degree of stability to the West Bank and Gaza. Luckily, extensive ideas have been proposed—many of which originate from Israel's own security establishment—that can be win-wins for Palestinians and Israelis, such as measures to improve the economic situation and freedom of movement of Palestinians in the West Bank and bring the Palestinian Authority back to Gaza as a precursor to investment in the Strip beyond basic humanitarian relief.

Bolstering the Palestinians economically and politically while courting international allies will enhance the chances of success when the time is right. After all, even the best-crafted peace plan will face difficult—even insurmountable—hurdles if it is not built on solid foundations. The political developments in Israel could, at least as far as the peace process is concerned, end up being a very productive crisis indeed.

Ghaith al-Omari is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and coauthor of its 2018 study [State with No Army, Army with No State: Evolution of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces, 1994–2018](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-with-no-army-army-with-no-state>. ❖

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