

Are Israeli Politics Dooming Kushner's Peace Push?

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Even if Netanyahu somehow prevails in the April election, prospects for a grand deal with the Palestinians will likely remain dim.

The Israeli attorney general's 55-page preliminary indictment linking Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to three charges of corruption may create collateral damage: President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan.

Until now, many had assumed that Netanyahu would win Israel's election on April 9 and the long-awaited Trump plan—an effort to make what the U.S. president has described as “the deal of the century”—would be put forward shortly afterward. Given the close relationship between Trump and Netanyahu, it seemed a certainty that the plan's overall contours would suit the Israeli premier even if he might object to some of its components.

Hopes have never been high, whether in Washington or the Middle East, that Trump would be able to reach a breakthrough where many American presidents have not. And yet this novice president has persistently instructed aides to pursue this effort even as regional leaders and pundits all over have panned his peace push as unrealistic, one-sided, ill-timed, or worse.

But the biggest challenge for Trump may be the shifting political winds in Israel. Only a strong prime minister can take the big risks required for peace, but Netanyahu is struggling to overcome a difficult few weeks. First, there was a merger of two centrist parties, including an unprecedented joining of three former military chiefs of staff who could neutralize Netanyahu's advantage in the all-important national security sphere. This new Blue-White party is led by former IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, who suddenly surged roughly ahead of Netanyahu in the polls. Second, the attorney general's preliminary indictment against the premier has cast a legal cloud over Netanyahu. Gantz may have a real shot to unseat Netanyahu, though the incumbent prime minister has campaigned relentlessly in recent weeks and erased Gantz's lead. Netanyahu is confident, too, that he can more easily cobble together a majority coalition. Yet even if he prevails in April, the legal case will dog Netanyahu's political future for months to come.

The Gantz-Netanyahu showdown is already affecting U.S. calculations before the plan is rolled out. At a recent U.S.-led Middle East conference in Warsaw, President Trump's son-in-law and White House adviser, Jared Kushner, announced the U.S. will not release the plan until after the Israeli elections. Kushner, whom Trump has tasked with leading the negotiations, is consulting Arab leaders about the economic dimensions of the plan, hoping that wealthier Gulf countries will pay for the proposal's focus on regional development. Of course, the Gulf states are unlikely to do so before knowing more sensitive aspects of the plan regarding issues such as Jerusalem and borders.

However, Kushner's mere mention in an interview with Sky Arabia that the plan will deal with “borders” was enough to shake Israeli politics. Netanyahu's leading opponent to his right, Education Minister Naftali Bennett, saw the reference as presaging a Palestinian state and launched a broadside charging that the premier would cave to Trump after the elections. One can guess Kushner will shelve future such interviews between now and April.

Here are three possible election outcomes. None of them bodes well for the peace plan:

Option One: Netanyahu wins and lurches to the right due to the configuration of the multi-party race. If that happens, his room to make compromises could shrink further. On one hand, he will view a victory as personal vindication in light of his legal troubles. On the other, Netanyahu has rivalries among the right, including with the party led by Bennett and one led by former Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman. With a finalized indictment still looming over him, how long can he expect these rivals to stick with him? The balance of power within the coalition is likely to shift away from Netanyahu so long as he remains under a legal cloud—leaving his political fate in the hands of rivals who think Trump's ideas are too risky for Israel.

Option Two: Netanyahu wins but looks to the center. There is speculation that Netanyahu would use the presentation of the Trump plan after the elections to widen political space in the center—making Gantz defense minister and the other leading Blue-White centrist, Yair Lapid, foreign minister. Additionally, the media's focus on peace could distract the public from Netanyahu's legal problems. Gantz, however, has said that he would not sit in the same coalition as Netanyahu. If he stands by that pledge, what was once deemed the most likely scenario has

evaporated—at least for now.

Option Three: Gantz wins outright and creates a moderate coalition of center-left parties, perhaps with a smattering of ultra-orthodox parties. (Gantz has also not ruled out inviting the Likud in as a junior partner so long as Netanyahu is excluded.) In theory, this approach should give joy to Trump as it would be a coalition based on accommodation with Washington and Palestinian partners. However, precisely for this very reason, Gantz is unlikely to get behind a peace plan he has not had a chance to shape, as Netanyahu had for the last two-plus years. The U.S. will need to consult Gantz, who might not take office until late spring.

On one hand, Gantz—like Netanyahu—will likely be attracted to Trump’s regional focus on Arab states, an idea designed to show Israelis what they have to gain, and not just yield, for the promise of peace. At the same time, a cautious Gantz will not want Trump to put forward something the Palestinians are likely to reject, as seems to be the case due to the expectation of terms less favorable to the Palestinians than those put forward by Bill Clinton in 2000 and amid deteriorating ties between Washington and Ramallah since Trump moved the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in December 2017.

For Gantz, trying to go for broke and solve the entire conflict as Trump favors is not a plus if the result is failure. He thinks it’s better to make progress with the Palestinians, though he has expressed pessimism that a grand deal is possible right now. Alternatively, some on the Israeli right may prefer a failed Trump plan if they think the Palestinians will be blamed for saying no and they can reap the benefit of Trump’s ire at the Palestinians by annexing key chunks of the West Bank with scant protest from Washington.

Any of these three election outcomes would add fresh doubts about the viability of the proposal. The Trump peace plan was always an uphill climb, but the path looks steeper now.

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