

## Trump Must Not Let Jared Kushner's Peace Plan See the Light of Day

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Releasing a U.S. proposal that is bound to fail would legitimize Israeli calls for annexation, give Saudi Arabia leverage over Washington, and strengthen Iran.

The final absentee ballots have not yet been counted in Israel's election, but the results so far indicate that Benjamin Netanyahu is well on his way toward cobbling together the 61-seat majority needed to form a new governing coalition. This would give Netanyahu an unprecedented fifth term as Israel's prime minister.

If Netanyahu does form a government, attention will soon turn to the Trump administration's long-awaited Middle East peace plan. Since the U.S. plan was based on close consultations with Netanyahu, it was assumed that the only stumbling block to its launch would be his defeat and replacement by a new leader with different ideas on relations with the Palestinians. Netanyahu's apparent victory means that the White House rollout of the plan could be imminent. That would be a disaster.

It would be a serious mistake for U.S. President Donald Trump to take the still-secret proposals devised by his son-in-law Jared Kushner and his colleagues and issue them in the name of the United States. The problem is not simply that the circumstances are ripe for failure, due to the deep political chasm between Israelis and Palestinians combined with the Trump administration's inability to be both a friend to Israel and an honest broker of peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The Kushner plan also stands a good chance of actually setting back U.S. interests in three critical areas: It might lead to annexation of the West Bank, it could give the Saudi government leverage over the United States that it doesn't currently have, and it would distract from Trump's signature achievement of putting real pressure on Iran's government.

Issuing the Kushner plan risks triggering a chain of events that would result in a decision by Netanyahu to annex parts of the contested West Bank, a step that even the most conservative and nationalist Israeli governments over the past half-century have declined to take. Annexation—or, as many Israelis prefer to say euphemistically, “extending Israeli civil law to territories currently under military rule”—is already the platform of key parties Netanyahu needs to form a governing coalition. In addition, a large majority of his Likud party's parliamentary delegation supports the idea.

In the final hours of the campaign, Netanyahu himself endorsed the idea of annexing parts of the territories as a gambit to make sure the Likud didn't lose voters to parties further to the right. Controversial though his last-minute move may have been, Likud's success suggests it was a smart one. However, the shrewd and risk-averse Netanyahu would most likely prefer to find a way to keep the murky status quo, in which Israel maintains security control over the entire West Bank and channels support to many existing Israeli settlements while holding out the admittedly dim prospect of a diplomatic resolution with the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority.

This awkward situation, in which Israel and the PA have strained political ties but effective security cooperation, has proven surprisingly resilient. Few love the status quo, but it is not so objectionable that either Netanyahu or Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas has walked away from it. It may not have brought a final peace deal, but it has sustained the PA as a reasonably well-functioning governing entity—by regional standards—and protected the West Bank from becoming a platform for rocket and terrorist attacks against Israel.

The fact that the Israeli-Palestinian status quo survived the move of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, the closing of a separate U.S. consulate general that traditionally served Palestinians, severe cuts in U.S. aid to the West Bank, and the closing of the Palestine Liberation Organization's representative office in Washington—measures that collectively appear to Palestinians as a punitive attack—is a testament to its durability. That surprisingly sustainable house of cards may finally come crumbling down if Abbas rejects the Kushner plan, which he has already given every indication of doing. In turn, Israeli rightists will seize on Abbas's “no” to argue that Israel has no negotiating partner, gutting a key rationale for keeping the status quo alive.

Instead, rightist politicians will argue that, with no partner, Israel should simply extend its sovereignty to key parts of the West Bank (i.e., annex them), just as it did 38 years ago on the Golan Heights—and they will point out that Trump's recent decision to recognize the legality of the Golan annexation is a powerful hint that the White House will greenlight West Bank annexation, too. To entice these right-of-Likud parties into his coalition, Netanyahu may

find himself forced to accede to this demand, especially if it comes with the sweetener of their support for new legislation that protects sitting prime ministers from criminal prosecution—which would allow him to stay in office despite facing a pending criminal indictment on corruption charges.

The morning after a Middle East peace plan is issued in his name, Trump will face a slew of problems he doesn't currently have to deal with. Israel's annexation of parts of the West Bank, if it is done outside an agreement with the Palestinians, will trigger charges from Arab and European capitals that Israel has violated its legal commitments under both United Nations resolutions and existing Israeli-Palestinian agreements, and they are likely to take steps to punish Israel internationally.

Moreover, annexation will probably sound the death knell for Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation and perhaps for the PA itself, offering enemies of peace both a substantive and a propaganda bonanza. And unlike the move of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, on which the U.S. Congress was on the record with strong bipartisan support for more than two decades, annexation will threaten to splinter U.S. opinion when it comes to backing Israel, affecting a far larger slice of the political spectrum than just the increasingly anti-Israel progressive wing of the Democratic Party.

Even if Kushner has already factored in all these negative repercussions of persuading his father-in-law to issue the peace plan, he might still win the day by reasoning that only a dramatic change to the status quo can shake the parties into rethinking their traditional positions and open up new possibilities. He likely assumes that key Arab states—led by Saudi Arabia—are poised to bless his plan, giving it vital backing that will compel Abbas not to reject it out of hand.

But there are two problems with this assumption. First, the Saudis are unlikely to offer even a tepid endorsement of the peace plan without similar backing from Israel's Arab peace partners, Egypt and Jordan. Just last week, Jordan reportedly rejected a U.S. offer to mediate a narrower issue—a simmering dispute with Israel on Jerusalem's Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif—because it accuses Washington of bias on matters related to Jerusalem. And Egypt is firmly part of the Arab consensus that publicly rejected the Trump administration's decision to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan, a step that severely curtailed Arab room for maneuver on a future peace plan. The friendship between the Trump and Al Saud families notwithstanding, both Jordan and Egypt have shown spine in recent years in resisting Saudi pressure to take steps they view as contrary to their national interests, and endorsing a plan that earns a Palestinian rejection would almost certainly be a bridge too far.

The second problem with the Saudis-will-back-us scenario is that the Saudi leadership is not stupid. If the fate of the Kushner plan is in the hands of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, that provides them with critical leverage at a moment when broader U.S.-Saudi relations are facing their worst tensions since the 9/11 attacks.

Viewed from Riyadh, the deepening bipartisan criticism in the United States of Saudi Arabia—manifested in repeated congressional votes condemning Riyadh on the war in Yemen, its detention and prosecution of human rights activists, and, of course, the assassination of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi—must seem galling. While the near-universal view in U.S. policy circles is that the solution to this problem begins with the Saudi crown prince accepting some measure of responsibility for the heinous actions of his subordinates, the leverage provided by the Kushner plan will give Riyadh the power to turn the tables on the White House.

It would not be surprising if the Saudis demand that Trump fix their problem in Congress as the price for Saudi backing for the Kushner plan. Any administration efforts to strong-arm Republican critics of Saudi policy would only worsen the underlying crisis in U.S.-Saudi relations, to the detriment of U.S. security interests in the broader region. And this too would all be because the president had needlessly advanced his son-in-law's peace plan.

Finally, in addition to triggering a negative spiral in U.S.-Israeli, Israeli-Palestinian, and U.S.-Saudi ties, moving forward with the Kushner plan would distract from the president's signature achievement in the Middle East: the unexpectedly effective impact of the so-called maximum pressure campaign on Iran. When Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and reimposed U.S. sanctions on Iran last year, there was good reason to be skeptical. But the administration has made impressive headway in its effort to impose a cost on Iran for its objectionable behavior. So far, the campaign has compelled nearly two dozen customers of Iranian oil exports to bring their purchases down to zero, severely exacerbating the troubles of Iran's economy. To see Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah beg his followers for donations, as he did in a [recent speech](#), is a clear sign that Tehran is running low on cash.

The Trump administration should not give Iran and its local Islamist allies a political victory by issuing a Middle East peace plan that is likely to earn swift rejection by the Palestinians and strong criticism even from longtime U.S. allies. It makes little sense to hand Iran's supreme leader and his regional partners a propaganda coup at a moment when the U.S. pressure campaign might actually be bearing fruit. Tehran might even sense opportunity and scrape together enough money—along with Islamist sympathizers in Qatar and Turkey—to help Hamas and Islamic Jihad take advantage of Abbas's weakness to make a play for power in the West Bank.

Issuing the Middle East peace plan in the current environment is a lose-lose-lose proposition. It is not easy to devise a U.S. policy proposal that could unleash forces that drive a stake in the heart of U.S.-Israeli relations while destroying the Palestinian Authority, that could worsen the already severe crisis in U.S.-Saudi ties, and that could provide a powerful boost to the mullahs in Iran, but there is a nontrivial chance the Kushner peace plan would do all of this.

Right now, the plan is still Kushner's, not Trump's. For the sake of important U.S. interests in the Middle East, the president should ensure it stays that way.

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