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President Trump's Plan for Ending The Israeli Palestinian Conflict Regional Reactions & Initial Observations

By Avi Melamed

On Tuesday, January 28, 2020, US President Donald Trump presented his plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The program was introduced in a ceremony at the White House. Attendees included Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, senior US government officials, and the ambassadors of Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.

What are the Initial Responses in the Middle East?

One camp overwhelmingly **opposes** the plan. That camp includes the **Palestinians, Hezbollah, Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Tunisia**. A second camp **welcomes** the plan and supports the leadership taken by the United States. This camp includes the **Gulf State Monarchies** (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, The United Arab Emirates), **Jordan, and Egypt**. Israeli public opinion seems to **generally welcome** the plan. Israeli Arabs, the Israeli left and the Israeli far-right parties **oppose**.

The Responses Indicate two Major Aspects of the Geopolitical Reality of the Middle East

1. The Palestinian issue is low on the list of priorities for the leading Arab states, including Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf Monarchies. This is a process that has been evolving and deepening over the last decade.

This is an outcome of the following:

- The Arab states are **struggling with their own** severe social and economic **challenges**. Arab countries like Lebanon and Iraq are on the verge of total collapse. Syria, Yemen, and Libya are ruined following years of war.
- Key Arab leaders are **disgruntled** - to say the least – with Palestinian politics. Especially the internal Palestinian **split between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas***.
- The Arab Gulf Monarchies and Egypt **want to curb the Iranian threat and Turkey's vision of regional hegemony**.
- The Arab Gulf Monarchies (excluding Qatar and Oman) and Egypt **resent Hamas' alliance with their rivals - Iran, Turkey, and the Muslim Brotherhood**.

In various articles and interviews over the past few years, I have outlined the process and the implications of the decline of the Palestinian issue in the Arab world. And in my book, *Inside the Middle East* (2016), I wrote: "...*One of the outcomes of the events in the Middle East is that the Palestinian agenda is pushed aside in the political and cultural agenda of the Arab world which engaged with its challenges and hardships*".(pp. 268-269)

2. Regional Powers use the Israeli - Palestinian conflict to further their own interests.

- **In the West**, there is a view that the **Israeli-Palestinian conflict is what shapes the Middle East**. *The reality is that it is the other way around.*
- The **Israeli Palestinian conflict** is - and always has been - *a card used by regional players to advance their own goals.*
- Iran, Turkey, and other members in the camp that rejects Trump's plan echo hardcore Palestinian narratives. For example: "Jerusalem is holy for Muslims only"; "Palestinian land and the Palestinian cause are not for sale"; "The United States is a biased mediator " and more.

Iran and Turkey oppose Trump's initiative because they have an interest in perpetuating the conflict because the **Israeli Palestinian conflict helps them achieve their own goals**.** (should we give an example?) In an article entitled [The Deal of the Century and the Bidding Festival](#) (January 29, 2020), Saudi columnist **Mashari Althaydi** writes "*...the Iranian axis and the Muslim Brotherhood supporters (i.e., Turkey and Qatar) will likely use Trump's plan to further enhance their interests at the expense of the deprived Palestinian people...Unfortunately, this year we will see a huge market for trading again on the Palestinian issue, without any sense of "realism" responsibility towards this afflicted people.*"

Formal Response from Arab States

The official responses of the leading Arab states - Egypt, and the Gulf States Monarchies, to President Trump's Initiative, express gratitude, and appreciation to President Trump for his efforts.

Formal announcements from Arab countries in response to Trump's plan emphasize the following elements:

- The goal, as Trump's proposal outlines, is the **establishment of a Palestinian state**.
- The agreement must comply with **United Nations Security Council Resolutions**.
- The plan should be **based on the Arab Peace Initiative offered by the late Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al Saud**, which was formally adopted in the Arab Summit in Beirut in 2007. This initiative outlines the following terms for Israeli-Arab peace:
 - The establishment of a **Palestinian State** within the **1967 borders with its capital in East Jerusalem**.
 - Settling the **Palestinian refugee** issue.
 - Israeli **withdrawal** from the **Golan Heights**.

Palestinian Reactions

The Palestinians understand that they have the **weaker hand**. **They know that the Palestinian issue is not a top priority for the Arab world, not for Arab leaders**. Therefore, they are **not surprised by the details of the plan, nor are they shocked by the positive response of the central Arab camp**. In that context, Dr. Nasr al-Laham, the Chief-Editor of the official Palestinian Authority news agency Ma'an, penned an article he called [A Syrian Style Reply](#) (January 28, 2020) in which he said: "...*We (Palestinians) know that (Arab) missiles will not rain down on Tel Aviv. We know that Arab countries will not sever ties with the US. We know that Arab armies are not going to gather next to Israel's borders. We know that Arab leaders will kiss Trump's hand in the back room. Yet, Trump's plan will result in another one hundred years of suffering and misery.*"

Does the Trump Outline Have a Chance? And Does it Make Any Difference at All?

Despite the much (and quite dramatic) media waves and headlines, it must be clear: Trump's outline is **not even the beginning of the beginning**. The framework proposed by the Trump administration is, at most, perhaps the starting point of a very long journey that has no certainty of being fulfilled. Critics of Trump's plan say it is very close to Israel's positions and that the Palestinians will never accept it. Both arguments are correct. The critics, therefore, conclude that President Trump's outline is of no importance. In my opinion, this is the wrong conclusion. Why do I say that? The path to practical, sustainable arrangements – *let alone "peace"* - is very long. This diagnosis is valid for any plan offered. **Solving conflicts in the Middle East is not about "peace."** It is about **arrangements**. Arrangements that must be adjusted from time to time. This is particularly valid in the case of the Israeli– Palestinian conflict. One must internalize that the **end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is nowhere in sight**. That is not a political statement. **It is a reality statement**. Peace is not a realistic goal. Arrangements – perhaps, are.

And that brings me to say why is the Trump program significant.

- Compared to previous Western initiatives, President Trump's plan reflects **a more up-to-date dialogue with the realities** that exist on the ground. This alone is very significant. Lebanese senior columnist Elias Harfush accurately addresses this matter in his article, "[This Deal is the Result of the Region's Conditions](#)" (January 31st, 2020).
- Trump's plan marks the **end of the paradigm** that has dominated previous Western diplomatic efforts to end the conflict because it presents **three points that were never presented** by the West as must components of a settlement.

These three issues are:

- **Jerusalem will not be divided**
- **Hamas must disarm** as a condition for the establishment of a Palestinian state
- Palestinian must **relinquish**, once and for all, their demand that Palestinian **refugees and their descendants will be resettled in Israel**, a Palestinian concept known as "The Right of Return" – *Haq al-'Awda* in Arabic.



Trump's outline - even if not fulfilled, will **set the tone for future frameworks**. On that matter, Lebanese columnist Hussam Itani wrote an article entitled [Trump's Plan: Imposing the Fait Accompli on the Palestinians](#) (January 30, 2020) in which he said..."*Trump's successor may not agree with Trump on anything other than the need to adopt Trump's approach toward the Israeli – Palestinian issue.*"

For these reasons, President Trump's plan is significant.

Short term prediction: What's next?

The Palestinians will likely focus their efforts on **diplomatic efforts and public diplomacy**. In that regard, the **Palestinian Authority** has formally asked for an immediate **meeting of the Arab League**. Palestinian President Mahmoud **Abbas** is reportedly planning to give a **speech at the United Nations** soon. And The head of **Hamas'** Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, **urged Arab leaders to reject the deal**.

Palestinians will likely apply **measures of civil protests**, including strikes, demonstrations, and perhaps confined, non-lethal confrontation with Israeli forces focusing on the touchline in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

Hamas, in my evaluation, will **avoid** generating a **wave of violence**. However, the Palestinian **Islamic Jihad (PIJ)** might **initiate a wave of violence**. During 2019 the PIJ attacked Israel, ignoring more than once Hamas' interest in calm. Indeed, within 48 hours after the announcement of the plan, several rockets were launched from Gaza into Israel. The Israeli retaliation was restrained. The air force attacked several deserted Hamas positions, for example. No Palestinian group has claimed responsibility for the shooting of the rockets.

Other **militant Islamic** groups like **ISIS** will likely **strive to launch a significant attack on Israeli targets**. Though ideologically those groups vow to eliminate Israel by violence, they have thus far rarely concentrated on that part of their agenda. President Trump's plan incentivizes these groups to attack Israeli targets because it will gain the points in Muslim public opinion, and they will demonstrate that they are factors that need to be taken into account because they have the independent means to impact the reality in the region.

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