

How the Trump Plan Makes Peace Possible

by Douglas J. Feith and Lewis Libby

President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan transforms long-standing official U.S. ideas about peace diplomacy and about the U.S. role in the region. In the past, U.S. peace-making efforts aimed directly at a Palestinian-Israeli deal. The Trump peace plan, however, stresses that fundamental changes are required on the Palestinian side before such a deal can become realistic. The plan does not hold out the promise of a quick peace settlement. Rather, it has a more limited aim: to improve chances that peace will one day be possible.

A Warning

The plan's most original element is a warning: If the Palestinian side continues to support terrorism and reject peace, its cause will suffer. For decades, Palestinian leaders, while refusing peace offers seen as reasonable by top U.S. officials, incited violence and demanded that the status quo in the territories be frozen pending a peace deal. The Palestinians are now being told that, if they continue on this path, Washington will not block Israel from advancing its own claims to areas in the West Bank that, in the administration's view, would be left to Israel in realistic peace talks. Those areas, according to the peace plan's "Conceptual Map," include not just the major settlement blocs but also the Jordan Valley.



U.S. president Donald Trump with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu (left), January 28, 2020, White House. The Trump peace plan warns that if the Palestinian side continues to support terrorism and reject peace, its cause will suffer.

The Trump plan effectively tells the Palestinians that the sensible question is not whether a deal provides everything they think they are entitled to, but whether it is the best deal available, now and in the foreseeable future. A huge development program is promised as a reward for compromise. Obviously, the U.S. government cannot force Palestinian leaders to accept a peace that they consider unjust, but if their demands for "justice" include the destruction of Israel, Trump warns that Washington will not support them and will not fight to preserve

the West Bank's legal status quo for their benefit.

The peace plan's strong language and unequivocal conclusions reflect more than just this president's personal talking style. They reflect the Trump team's acquaintance with the long, exasperating history of U.S. diplomacy undone by Palestinian rejectionism and terrorism.

Installation of Arafat and the PLO

For nearly thirty years, Palestinian-Israeli peace diplomacy has been based on the 1993 Oslo accords. These agreements created the Palestinian Authority (PA), which Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), headed. Israeli officials empowered the PA so that it would end the intifada, which began in 1987, promote peace, and negotiate in good faith a formal end to the conflict.

Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, who signed the accords, is often portrayed as the champion of the "two-state solution," but, until the end, he opposed creation of a Palestinian state. In his last Knesset speech on October 5, 1995, a month before he was assassinated, Rabin said the conflict's "permanent solution" would be a State of Israel and "alongside it a Palestinian entity," which he envisioned as "less than a state," which would "independently run the lives of the Palestinians under its authority."¹ Rabin promised in the same speech to preserve security through permanent Israeli control of the Jordan Valley.

Arafat disappointed expectations that he would use his new power and prestige as PA president to promote peace. Rather, he spoke

¹ "PM Rabin in Knesset – Ratification of Interim Agreement," Oct. 5, 1995, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem.

of a "jihad to liberate Jerusalem," comparing Oslo to a peace the Prophet Muhammad accepted before obliterating his enemy.² PA schools and official media stoked hostility to Israel. In demanding an end to "the occupation," they applied the term to cities within pre-1967 Israel—Haifa and Jaffa, for example—as much as to the territory Israel won in the 1967 Six-Day War. The PA honored terrorists that killed Israeli civilians, calling them heroes, naming streets for them, and urging children to emulate them. The PA enacted legislation that incentivized terrorism by providing official payments to terrorist prisoners held by Israel and to families of "martyrs" (i.e., terrorists killed in action). Critics call such legislation "pay-for-slay."³ More Israelis were killed in terrorist attacks after the Oslo accords than before.⁴

Nonetheless, U.S. president Bill Clinton tried for years to promote mutual Israeli-Palestinian confidence through agreements on practical problems such as water disputes, boundary issues, and local security arrangements. He hoped that diplomacy, by resolving misunderstandings and overcoming mistrust, could resolve the conflict.

A Most Generous Bid for Peace

With his term winding down, Clinton held a peace conference at Camp David in July 2000 to push for a deal to end the conflict. Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak made extraordinary concessions, offering the Palestinians control over an area at least 95

² Daniel Pipes, "[Lessons from the Prophet Muhammad's Diplomacy](#)," *Middle East Quarterly*, Sept. 1999.

³ Douglas J. Feith and Sander Gerber, "[The Department of Pay-for-Slay](#)," *Commentary*, Apr. 2017.

⁴ Efraim Karsh, *The Oslo Disaster* (Ramat Gan: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, 2016), p. 18.

percent the size of the West Bank.⁵ Barak also agreed to divide Jerusalem and accept Palestinian sovereignty over most of the Old City, including on the Temple Mount.⁶ Arafat refused to make peace, however, angering Clinton.

Arafat demanded acceptance of a Palestinian “right of return” that would require Israel to admit millions of Palestinians—a small number of original refugees and a large number of their descendants. “No Israeli leader would ever let in so many Palestinians that the Jewish character of the state could be threatened,” Clinton told Arafat, calling the claimed right “a deal breaker.”⁷

After the Camp David talks collapsed, Arafat launched an all-out terrorism campaign against Israel. Many of the attacks were perpetrated by official PA security forces or other individuals responsive to Arafat or protected by him.⁸ Before the talks, Barak had removed Israeli forces from Lebanon where for years they had been fighting Hezbollah militias that endangered northern Israel. Emboldened Palestinian demonstrators proclaimed, “Lebanon Today, Palestine Tomorrow.” At Camp David, Arafat threatened that “we can see to it that the Hezbollah [Lebanon]



U.S. president Bill Clinton (center) hosted a conference at Camp David, July 2000, to push for a peace deal. While Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak (left) made major concessions, PA president Yasser Arafat (right) refused to make peace.

precedent is replicated in the territories.”⁹ From 2000 to 2005, Arafat’s terrorism campaign killed more than 1,100 Israelis.¹⁰ Palestinian fatalities are estimated between 3,000 and 5,000.¹¹ Misleadingly called the Second Intifada, this campaign has more accurately been labeled “Arafat’s War” by Israeli historian Efraim Karsh.¹²

⁵ Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), p. 936.

⁶ Ehud Barak, *My Country, My Life: Fighting for Israel, Searching for Peace* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), p. 395.

⁷ Clinton, *My Life*, p. 943.

⁸ *The Jerusalem Post*, [Sept. 29, 2010](#).

⁹ Efraim Karsh and Gershon Hachohen, “[Israel’s Flight from South Lebanon 20 Years On](#),” Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, May 22, 2020.

¹⁰ “[Vital Statistics: Total Casualties, Arab-Israel Conflict \(1860-Present\)](#),” Jewish Virtual Library, Chevy Chase; “[Five Years of Violent Confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians](#),” Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Ramat Hasharon, Oct. 2, 2005.

¹¹ “[Vital Statistics: Total Casualties, Arab-Israel Conflict \(1860-Present\)](#).”

¹² See Efraim Karsh, *Arafat’s War: The Man and His Battle for Israeli Conquest* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), p. 189.

Despite the ongoing violence, Clinton tried again for a peace deal. With Barak's agreement, he offered Arafat terms (the "Clinton Parameters") even more forthcoming than Barak's Camp David proposals.¹³ U.S. peace negotiator Dennis Ross says the "unprecedented" offer went absolutely as far as Israel could go and included

a Palestinian state in all of Gaza and nearly all of the West Bank; a capital for the state in East Jerusalem; security arrangements that would be built on an international presence; and an unlimited right of return for Palestinian refugees to their own state.¹⁴

Arafat, however, refused to make peace.

Arafat's Rejectionism and Oslo's Flawed Premise

After eight years, the failure of the Oslo process suggested that the conflict was something more fundamental than mutual misunderstandings and lack of trust. It was increasingly clear that the problem was a matter of intense beliefs rooted in religious and nationalist identities. According to Palestinian nationalist ideology, Palestine is an indivisible, inalienable possession of the Arabs, and the Jews are only a religious

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group, not a people entitled to national self-determination and a Jewish majority state.¹⁵ Palestinian leaders have never actually been willing to renounce, once and for all,

Palestinian claims over any territory from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.

Martin Indyk, a senior Middle East policy advisor to Clinton, marveled that U.S. officials held so tenaciously to the delusion that Arafat was a peacemaker. "After eight years, Clinton and our team surely should have known with whom we were dealing," Indyk wrote, criticizing Clinton for making himself "dependent on the statesmanship of Yasser Arafat."¹⁶

Many Israelis, including on the Left, were galled that Arafat had repaid Barak's concessions by instigating horrific attacks against Israeli civilians. More and more Israelis concluded that they could neither persuade nor compel Palestinian leaders to make peace. PLO leaders might accept limited agreements—especially if rewarded by foreign donors—but were unwilling to end the conflict. Even if it agreed to a Palestinian state, Jerusalem could not stop the violence, so long as the Palestinian side remained unreconciled to Israel's existence.

¹³ Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), pp. 295-6.

¹⁴ Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), pp. 3-4.

¹⁵ "[The Palestinian National Charter](#): Resolutions of the Palestine National Council, July 1-17, 1968," The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, Yale Law School, art. 20; *The Jerusalem Post*, [Jan. 11, 2014](#).

¹⁶ Martin Indyk, *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), p. 375; see also, Elliott Abrams, *Tested by Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 25-6.

Israelis in large numbers came to the unhappy realization that they lacked the ability, short of national suicide, to appease their enemies. The slogan “peace now,” which implied that the Israeli government could have peace simply by changing its own policies, lost its following. The self-described “peace camp” shrank and has not recovered to this day.

Clinton warned incoming President George W. Bush against trusting Arafat. Soon thereafter, in February 2001, Barak lost his reelection bid, and Ariel Sharon became Israeli prime minister.

A Deceitful Terrorist

Despite Clinton’s warnings and the raging violence, the Bush team entered office willing to invest additional U.S. prestige in mediating between the Israelis and Arafat. Trying to induce Arafat to end terrorism and reinvigorate cooperation with Israel, Bush broke new diplomatic ground by endorsing a Palestinian state.¹⁷ Arafat, however, continued to fuel terrorist attacks. Bush was slow to anger, but Arafat’s bad will became



Military equipment confiscated from the Karine A, January 3, 2002. Yasser Arafat tried to smuggle a huge quantity of Iranian-supplied arms into Gaza in violation of his Oslo commitments. Israeli forces intercepted the contraband-laden ship.

insufferable for him after exposure of the Karine A affair.

In January 2002, Arafat tried to smuggle a huge quantity of Iranian-supplied arms into Gaza by sea in violation of his Oslo commitments. Israeli forces intercepted the contraband-laden ship, the Karine A.¹⁸ Within weeks after the 9/11 attacks, Arafat had opted not only to continue terrorism, but to prepare an escalation and to stand with Iran, the U.S. enemy and a major state sponsor of terrorism. Bush’s concession on Palestinian statehood appeared to have no effect on Arafat’s behavior.

In her memoirs, then-national security advisor Condoleezza Rice recounted that the Karine A affair “made it absolutely clear that [Arafat] was not going to lead his people to peace.”¹⁹ Nonetheless, immediately after the

¹⁷ George W. Bush, “[Address to the United Nations General Assembly](#),” Oct. 3, 2001, State Dept. archives, Washington, D.C.; Ross, *The Missing Peace*, p. 786; Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, pp. 306, 307, 311; Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, p. 16; Robert Satloff, “[The Peace Process at Sea: Karine A Affair and the War on Terrorism](#),” *The National Interest*, Mar. 1, 2002.

¹⁸ Satloff, “[The Peace Process at Sea](#).”

¹⁹ Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), pp. 135-6; see also, Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, p. 25.

ship's capture, she joined State Department officials in proposing that Bush write Arafat, chiding him on the Karine A but implicitly assuring him that no serious consequences would follow.²⁰ The idea was to put the affair behind them quickly and revive peace talks. One of the authors of this article, Lewis Libby, then Cheney's national security adviser and chief of staff, and Libby's deputy, Foreign Service Officer Eric Edelman, opposed the letter, arguing that the Karine A presented a rare, clarifying moment and that sweeping Arafat's misconduct under the rug would undermine U.S. diplomacy and likely result in more terrorism.²¹ Cheney agreed, so Rice brought the issue to Bush. Bush overruled Rice, scrapped the letter, elevated the Karine A issue, and demanded that Arafat show clearly that he was changing course.

Arafat, however, denied any role in the Karine A arms smuggling, a lie that infuriated Bush.²² Over the next months, Arafat's war included shooting Israeli families in their homes, bombing civilians on streets and in shopping malls, and massacring students at a Jewish religious school.

In spring 2002, Bush was considering how to handle Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's defiance of U.N. resolutions.

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Secretary of State Colin Powell believed that Arab states would defy Bush on Iraq unless he reactivated diplomacy with Arafat.²³ Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and their staffs disagreed

and argued that new peace initiatives would be futile and would appear to reward Arafat's terrorism.

State Department officials predicted dire consequences if Cheney failed to meet Arafat during the vice president's spring 2002 Middle East trip. Cheney agreed with Libby that, as a precondition, Arafat should sign a limited security agreement with Israel as the U.S. negotiator expected him to do. Arafat, however, refused to sign.²⁴ Then, in an April speech, Bush announced that Powell would go to the region to promote peace. In two meetings, Powell urged Arafat to make a positive gesture, but Arafat stood pat. Powell and Rice, nonetheless, favored convening a new peace conference. Bush rebuffed them. In June, Powell tried again, but, as Rice writes, the "President again said no, not with Arafat."²⁵

Bush was growing less and less receptive to advice from State Department and National Security Council staff officials to move forward with Arafat.²⁶ Bush and Cheney eventually embraced three insights: First, there was no hope for progress toward

²⁰ Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, p. 26; authors' telephone interview with Amb. Eric Edelman, June 2020; Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, p. 312; Satloff, "[The Peace Process at Sea](#)."

²¹ Authors' interview with Amb. Eric Edelman; Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, p. 26.

²² George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), p. 401; Dick Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), p. 373.

²³ Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, pp. 311, 315; Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, p. 34.

²⁴ Cheney, *In My Time*, p. 378.

²⁵ Rice, *No Higher Honor*, pp. 139, 142.

²⁶ Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, pp. 25-6; *Midland Reporter Telegram* (Midland, Tex.), [Jan. 24, 2002](#); Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, p. 312; authors' telephone interview with John Hannah, June 2020; *The Jerusalem Post*, [Sept. 28, 2017](#).

peace with Arafat. Second, the Palestinian issue would not bar Arab states from cooperating on important regional concerns, including Iraq. And third, as Cheney and others had repeatedly heard from leading Israelis, Jerusalem would compromise if Palestinians offered reasonable prospects for security and peace.

Bush saw Arafat as a deceitful terrorist. Yet he also, for the first time, gave Washington's support to a Palestinian state. And he pressured Sharon to relax security measures in hopes of facilitating a peace deal with Arafat. All in all, Arafat could claim credit with his people for persisting in the anti-Zionist armed struggle while causing changes in U.S. policy that favored the Palestinian national cause.

Repudiating Palestinian Leadership

In spring of 2002, Rice pushed for a presidential speech that would appeal to Arafat.²⁷ The Cheney and Rumsfeld teams favored a different speech. They wanted Bush to say that Arafat was not a peace partner.²⁸ Undersecretary of defense for policy Douglas Feith wrote to Rice's deputy and suggested that the president say,

Until the Palestinians have a leadership that can speak credibly of peace, prevent terrorism, counter extremism, and handle funds honestly and transparently,

²⁷ Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, p. 39.

²⁸ Authors' interviews with Edelman and Hannah.



U.S. president George W. Bush at the podium with (left to right) Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, and Donald Rumsfeld, White House, June 24, 2002. Bush called on the Palestinians to elect new leaders “not compromised by terror.”

the goal of a state of Palestine will remain out of reach.²⁹

Bush's new speech would go through more than thirty drafts. Delivered on June 24, 2002, its main point was repudiation of the PA's leaders and institutions. Bush called on the Palestinians to elect new leaders “not compromised by terror.” He criticized PA corruption, opacity, and lack of accountability. Bush said that the Palestinians needed “entirely new political and economic institutions based on democracy, market economics and action against terrorism.”³⁰ In U.S. Middle East policy, this was a major departure.

Blaming the PA for the lack of peace and for Palestinian suffering was novel, even shocking, especially for those wedded to what Rice in her memoirs called “the stale ideas governing policy toward the Middle

²⁹ Feith fax to Steve Hadley, “Notes for possible speech,” June 10, 2002.

³⁰ “[President Bush Calls for New Palestinian Leadership](#),” White House archives, Washington, D.C., June 24, 2002.

East.”³¹ Within weeks, State Department officials argued for Bush to modify his stand.³² He remained committed, however, to never dealing with Arafat again.

Arab diplomats soon proposed creating a “roadmap” for peace. The roadmap, as drafted by State Department officials, would call on the Palestinians to end terrorism and reform their political institutions first, then move toward a provisional state, and finally, full statehood.³³

The “Roadmap” Fails

When Arafat died in November 2004, his longtime deputy Mahmoud Abbas became PLO head and president of the PA. Bush, on the advice of Rice, his new secretary of state, greeted Abbas’s accession as a new beginning and treated him as a reformer and peacemaker.

Israel’s Sharon saw things differently. Not expecting peace in the near term, he finished building the security barrier that would impede terrorist infiltration from the West Bank. He also decided that Israel would withdraw from Gaza unilaterally, without negotiations or agreements. He viewed the costs of staying in Gaza as too high and thought that withdrawal, completed in fall 2005, could strengthen Israeli security overall.

Abbas and his Fatah faction within the PLO faced a political challenge from Hamas. As

The “Roadmap” assumed that Palestinian leaders were pursuing a peace deal in good faith.

the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas calls for elimination of Israel and the killing of Jews.³⁴ To bolster Abbas, the State Department supported the

PA’s January 2006 parliamentary elections, but Hamas won. A little over a year later, Hamas took control of Gaza away from the PA, after killing or expelling all the Fatah personnel there. As Hamas’s power grew, former secretary of state Henry Kissinger cautioned U.S. officials that Hamas’s radicalism should not obscure the support for terrorism from Abbas and the PLO, or their continued refusal, despite the Oslo accords, to accept Israel’s right to exist.³⁵

Despite all this, State Department officials restarted peace talks. Rice pressed Israeli officials to negotiate a “political horizon” addressing so-called final-status issues. This was contrary to previous assurances to Jerusalem that the Palestinians would first have to stop terrorism. The “Roadmap” had become little more than a revival of the Oslo process, which assumed that Palestinian leaders were pursuing in good faith a peace deal that would partition the Holy Land. Palestinian political reform, a critical issue in Bush’s June 24, 2002 speech, fell far to the rear.

Like Arafat, Abbas received a remarkably forthcoming offer from the Israelis. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered approximately 94 percent of the West Bank and a “land swap” from pre-1967 Israel equal to another 5 percent; Palestinian sovereignty in East Jerusalem; joint governance of

³¹ Rice, *No Higher Honor*, p. 144.

³² Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, p. 43.

³³ Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 405; “[President Discusses Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East](#),” White House archives, Washington, D.C., Mar. 14, 2003.

³⁴ “[Hamas Covenant 1988](#),” The Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale University, New Haven; Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, pp. 142, 160.

³⁵ Henry Kissinger, “Sharon’s legacy and Hamas,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 15, 2006.

Jerusalem's Old City; and Israeli acceptance of fifteen to twenty thousand Palestinian refugees over five years. In her memoirs, Rice expressed amazement at Olmert's "remarkable" offer, but "Abbas refused."³⁶ A 2007 international peace conference Rice had organized produced no breakthroughs.

Obama Reverses Course

Barack Obama entered the presidency hoping to transform the U.S. relationship with the Muslim world, seeing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a principal irritant in that relationship and holding Israel largely to blame for the lack of peace. Bush, he thought, had been too close to Israel, which relieved its leaders from making concessions, which Obama expected would bring peace.³⁷

To encourage peace talks, Obama prevailed on Israel to accept a ten-month "freeze" on new West Bank construction. Abbas squandered the freeze, failing to negotiate directly with Israel during most of it and then refusing to talk unless Israel extended it.

As he urged Jerusalem to take risks for peace, Obama gave the Israelis additional grounds to fear for their security. Most notably, Obama offered an "extended hand" if Iran, Israel's foremost threat, would "unclench its fist"³⁸ The resulting nuclear deal, top Israeli officials believed, gave Iran a path to a weapon and over \$100 billion that



U.S. president Barack Obama (right) meets with PA president Mahmoud Abbas, White House, May 28, 2009. Obama distanced his administration from Israel and promoted sympathy for the Palestinian cause but made no progress on peace through his efforts.

Iran could use to finance pro-Assad military operations and activities by Tehran's terrorist proxies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza.

Abbas continued to lead the PA throughout the Obama years as he still does though he was elected PA president only once, in 2005, to a four-year term. Under him, the PA continues to support terrorism and remains undemocratic, corrupt,³⁹ and unwilling to conclude a permanent peace with Israel. Abbas insists on a Palestinian "right of return" that would end Israel as a Jewish-majority state. He said he would never recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, rejectionist Hamas rules Gaza, expanding its arsenal.

Over two terms as president, Obama tested his theory for advancing peace. He

³⁶ Rice, *No Higher Honor*, p. 723.

³⁷ Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, pp. 345-7.

³⁸ Reuters, [Jan. 27, 2009](#).

³⁹ *Middle East Monitor* (London), [July 18, 2019](#).

⁴⁰ Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, pp. 378, 384, 387.

distanced his administration from Israel and promoted sympathy for the Palestinian cause. Yet, he had no progress to show for his efforts. During his tenure, neither Israel nor the PA made substantial new political concessions. Palestinian schools and official news media continued to exhort antisemitism and terrorism. Palestinians still labored under the PA's violent misrule, which stifled their lives and prospects. There were no peace talks underway when Obama left office.

For the Trump team, the primary obstacle to peace is the hope among Israel's enemies that they will defeat the Jewish State.

Deflating Hopes of Destroying Israel

Trump rejected Obama's peace policy as thoroughly as Obama had rejected Bush's. Top Trump administration officials do not accept the view that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the main issue in Middle East affairs. They do not believe that Washington must distance itself from Israel to promote peace or win cooperation from Arab states. They blame Palestinian leaders for refusing to make compromises to end the conflict and for harming Palestinians.⁴¹ Trump values Israel as the kind of foreign partner he seeks—a strong, democratic ally, active in defense of shared interests. His team praises Jerusalem for taking initiative, relying on its own troops, making available valuable intelligence, and battling successfully for goals common to Israel and the United States.⁴²

⁴¹ BBC, [Jan. 28, 2020](#); *Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), [June 6, 2019](#).

⁴² ["A Conversation with John Bolton,"](#) *The Jerusalem Post*, Aug. 25, 2018.

Trump's principal innovation in Middle East peace diplomacy is insisting that there should be consequences if the Palestinian side persists in terrorism and refuses reasonable peace terms.

This means that outsiders should not tell Israel to preserve the West Bank status quo if Palestinian officials choose to perpetuate the conflict.

A theme of the Obama administration was that Israel fuels terrorism by causing the Palestinians to despair about peace. While expressing sympathy for Palestinian suffering, the Trump team's contrary message is that the primary obstacle to peace is not despair but hope among Israel's enemies that they will eventually isolate and defeat the Jewish State. That hope is rooted in the well-known propaganda argument that Israel is an alien, artificial presence in the region that can be worn down, demoralized, and ultimately expelled as were the Crusaders and, in later centuries, the European imperial powers.

The Trump peace plan and the highly visible initiatives that preceded it—recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan, announcing that Israel's West Bank settlements are not inherently a violation of international law, and curtailing assistance to the PA while it funds terrorism—all counter PA hopes for Israel's elimination. These measures, taken in defiance of exaggerated fears of reactions from the "Arab street," convey mutually reinforcing messages: Israel is as legitimate as any other state. It is rooted in its land and has rights to security and self-defense. It will not forever be hostage to Palestinian rejectionism. And it will retain U.S. support.

The Trump Peace Plan

The Trump plan contradicts conventional wisdom by contending that there can be strategic cooperation between Israel and the Arab states before any Palestinian peace deal. Integrating Israel into the region, the plan states, would facilitate countering Iran's threats and "set the stage for diplomatic breakthroughs."⁴³

The plan sees Israel as ready to make necessary compromises to end the conflict but lacking a competent, well-intentioned Palestinian partner to engage. It would not ask Israel to sacrifice its security, noting that "extraordinary geographic and geo-strategic challenges" give Israel "no margin for error." Negative events in the West Bank—a takeover by Hamas, for example—could pose an "existential threat," the plan observes, adding that Israel "had the bitter experience of withdrawing from territories that were then used to launch attacks against it."⁴⁴

The plan describes the Jordan Valley—a defensive buffer that benefits both Israel and Jordan—as "critical for Israel's national security" and expects it, together with Israel's main West Bank settlement blocs, to remain "under Israeli sovereignty" following good-faith peace negotiations. The plan's "Conceptual Map" shows boundaries that might emerge from such talks. This has immediate real-world consequences, for, as Trump has stated, "The United States will recognize Israeli sovereignty over the



Photo: Natan Flayer

Rockets from Gaza hit Sderot, June 2014. The Trump plan states that Gaza and the West Bank are "politically divided," and Hamas is "a terror organization that has ... murdered hundreds of Israelis."

territory that my vision provides to be part of the State of Israel. Very important."⁴⁵ It is notable that the plan includes this map. No prior administration ever defined the territory that Israel could have U.S. support to hold permanently, with or without a peace agreement.

Replacing Palestinian Leadership

The Trump plan paints a sorry picture of Palestinian politics: "Gaza and the West Bank are politically divided. Gaza is run by Hamas, a terror organization that has fired thousands of rockets at Israel and murdered hundreds of Israelis." In the West Bank, the PA is corrupt, runs failed institutions and,

⁴³ ["Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People."](#) White House, Washington, D.C., Jan. 2020, p. 37.

⁴⁴ [Ibid.](#), p. 7.

⁴⁵ ["Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu of the State of Israel in Joint Statements."](#) White House, Washington, D.C., Jan. 28, 2020.

due to “lack of accountability and bad governance,” has “squandered” billions of dollars.⁴⁶ Without substantial reform, the plan warns, there will be neither im-

provement in Palestinians’ lives nor peace with Israel. Using language virtually identical to that in Bush’s June 24, 2002 speech, it calls for rule of law, transparency, accountability, separation of powers and a fair and independent judiciary.⁴⁷ Trump, like Bush, blames Palestinian leaders for indoctrinating their publics—children, in particular—to hate Israel and commit terrorism.⁴⁸ This is hardly designed to win favor with current Palestinian officials. It is an appeal over their heads to the people and around the PA to the Arab states.

Critics who say Trump’s plan will not win acceptance by Mahmoud Abbas are missing its main point, which is that peace has no chance without substantial Palestinian political changes. In the Trump team’s view, Abbas and his colleagues brought this negative judgment on themselves through a long train of terrorism, ideological extremism, and bad-faith diplomacy. Having declared the need for Palestinian reform, the Trump plan proposes ways to encourage the rise of new leadership. It admits that success may prove elusive.

The \$50 Billion Carrot

The plan promises a \$50 billion economic development program if the Pales-

Trump blames Palestinian leaders for indoctrinating their publics to hate Israel and commit terrorism.

tinians elevate leaders that make needed governmental reforms and accept reasonable terms for peace. The idea is not novel. The amount is.

Would-be peacemakers have tried for many decades to counter Palestinian anti-Zionism by dangling prospects of future prosperity. Though never carrying so enormous a price tag, such incentives consistently failed to overcome Arab nationalist and religious objections to Zionism and Israel. Palestinian leaders framed their rejectionist case as a matter of honor, justice, and duty to the Arab nation and to God, considerations that they say outweigh material concerns.

Economic inducements have never yet generated a politically significant Palestinian party in favor of ending the conflict. The Trump plan is testing whether economic inducements can work now, in an era of increasing Israeli military and economic might, Palestinian division, and Sunni Arab states’ anxiety about Iran. At a minimum, one can assume that the \$50 billion carrot is meant to communicate U.S. sympathy for the Palestinians and hopes to improve their situation.

Help from Arab States

The Trump plan urges Arab states to promote better Palestinian leadership and to reach their own accommodations with Israel.⁴⁹ Clinton and Bush had similar hopes. Trump officials think that present circumstances are more favorable.

Sunni Arab states, some of which

⁴⁶ [“Peace to Prosperity,”](#) p. 4.

⁴⁷ [Ibid.](#), p. 34.

⁴⁸ [“Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel,”](#) White House, Washington, D.C., Feb. 15, 2017.

⁴⁹ [“Peace to Prosperity,”](#) p. 36.

include significant Shiite populations, see Iran's growing regional influence, revolutionary Shiite ideology, military power (including its potential nuclear weapons capability), and capable proxies as a deadly threat. The Israelis help counter Tehran militarily through strikes against Iranian forces in Syria and against Iran's proxy Hezbollah. The Israelis also fight Tehran diplomatically, especially in Washington, by arguing for economic sanctions and other means of constraint. Needing Jerusalem's voice on this issue, Arab states have shown a greater willingness to deal openly with Israelis and to increase their economic and strategic cooperation.⁵⁰

At the same time, Arab leaders have ample grounds to be antagonized by the Palestinians' political disunity, the power of Hamas—an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, an enemy of Saudi Arabia and other Arab states—growing Iranian influence in Gaza, and the corruption and other shortcomings of PA leaders.

The Saudis, Egyptians, and Jordanians consequently have an interest in promoting better Palestinian leadership. The Palestinians rely heavily on foreign diplomatic and financial support, so foreigners have some leverage. Improving Palestinian governance may be a mission impossible, but there is sense in appealing to regional and other actors to play a role.



PA president Mahmoud Abbas (right) at Arab League headquarters, Cairo, April 21, 2019. Abbas has called for Arab political support for the Palestinian people. But, Arab leaders have ample grounds to be antagonized by the Palestinians' political disunity, growing Iranian influence in Gaza, and the corruption of PA leaders.

Changing Strategic Calculations

An innovative feature of the Trump peace plan is the warning to the Palestinians that steadfast rejectionism will not give them victory, but further erode their position. In other words, time is not on their side, and it is not necessarily even neutral. As noted above, if the Palestinians refuse to end the conflict, Washington will support the Israelis unilaterally extending sovereignty in parts of the West Bank that the Trump team expects Israel would keep anyway in any future peace agreement.

Trump has thus set aside what had been a general principle of U.S. policy since 1967: that changes in the status of the West Bank should be made only through negotiations. Negotiated change, of course, would be preferable, but the Palestinians are being warned that, if they refuse to negotiate reasonably, the Israelis can improve their position, with U.S. backing.

⁵⁰ See, for example, *The New York Times*, [Oct. 26, 2018](#); TRTWorld (Istanbul), [Feb. 6, 2020](#); *The Japan Times* (Tokyo), [Feb. 23, 2020](#); *The Times of Israel*, [Feb. 24, 2020](#).

U.S. support for unilateral extension of Israeli sovereignty has generated worldwide controversy over whether Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu will and should take the action. The pros and cons are worthy of serious debate. Whatever the Israeli government decides, the Trump plan's key goal is to change the diplomatic circumstances that have incentivized the Palestinian side to perpetuate the conflict. The Trump team is saying it makes no sense for Palestinian leaders to support terrorism and reject reasonable offers of peace while expecting U.S. officials to insist that the Israelis maintain the West Bank's legal status quo.

Trump's plan abandons past U.S. policies that rewarded the PA's violent intransigence.

Conclusion

For the last half century, U.S. officials have tried persistently to persuade bad Palestinian leaders to do good—that is, to improve Palestinian lives, fight terrorism, and make realistic compromises for a peace based on permanent coexistence with Israel. The history reviewed above shows why the Trump team has concluded that neither “even-handed” U.S. diplomacy nor pressure to resolve “final-status issues” will succeed without Palestinian leaders willing to end the conflict once and for all. The Trump peace plan is the most categorical U.S. government declaration ever that the key to peace is reform that produces new Palestinian leadership willing to make reasonable compromises.

That is why it is fair to say that the Trump plan is not trying to make peace but to bring about changes that will make peace possible. In prioritizing Palestinian reform, Trump's plan builds on ideas laid out in the Bush June 24, 2002 speech but expands on them dramatically. The plan, like those of Trump's predecessors, sympathizes with the

suffering of the Palestinians and argues that ending the conflict with Israel would alleviate their misery. If they agree to reasonable peace terms, the plan promises unprecedented rewards. But it warns that, in the event of continued Palestinian terrorism and rejectionism, the United States will not oppose Jerusalem improving its position through steps that a realistic peace agreement would in any case allow. In this, Trump's plan abandons past U.S. policies that rewarded the PA's violent intransigence by trying to preserve the West Bank's legal status quo.

The Trump team sees Israel's security and strength as serving U.S. interests in the Middle East. As it encourages Arab states to cooperate with Israel against rising regional threats, Trump's peace plan argues that such cooperation can grow substantially even before an Israeli-Palestinian final peace deal. If it grows, the plan says, peace could more easily be achieved.

Since the 1940s, U.S. policy has been constrained by fear of the “Arab street”—concern that support for Israel would ignite the tinderbox of Arab public opinion with terrible effects on U.S. regional interests. Trump administration policies have time and again successfully flouted that fear, from recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital to publication of this peace plan with its strong support for Israeli security and blunt criticism of the PA. One of the lasting effects is likely to be that, in future U.S. policy debates, arguments about the “Arab street” will be evaluated with skepticism.

The Trump plan cannot ensure a peace deal and does not expect one soon. Its virtues lie in exposing the falsity of conventional views about the Middle East; pointing to what is truly precluding peace; offering

ample rewards for overcoming those obstacles; and ending policies that incentivize the conflict's perpetuation. It advances U.S. interests in the region by sending sympathetic and constructive messages to the Palestinians and forthrightly supporting the security of the capable, democratic U.S. ally, Israel.

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