

LFI Focus: ‘Deal of the century’ or joke of the century?



The release of the US Middle East plan last week was a nakedly political event. As his impeachment trial in the US Senate continued, Donald Trump attempted to bolster his support among pro-Israel evangelical Christians at home, while throwing an electoral lifeline to Benjamin Netanyahu. Indeed, the Israeli prime minister was formally charged with multiple counts of corruption on the very day he was happily lauding the historic nature of Trump’s proposals.

“Given the timing of the release,” wrote the New York Times’ foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman, “I have to begin by asking: Is this plan about two states for two peoples or is it about one diversion for two dirty leaders?”

In the week since the publication of the 50-page plan, however, the political benefits for Netanyahu have become a lot less clear.

“Deal of the century”?

The prime minister’s sense of delight as he stood beside Trump was understandable. While formally accepting a two-state solution – a concept the administration has repeatedly distanced itself from – the US proposals displayed little by way of even-handedness. Unusually for a peace plan, one of the two parties to the dispute had been almost completely

absent from both the design phase and the unveiling ceremony. The Palestinians, who once hoped that Trump's unpredictability and suggestions that both sides would have to make concessions might augur some form of breakthrough, have been absent from the negotiating table since December 2017 when the US formally recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Under Trump's plans, the Palestinians are offered the prospect of a state after four years. That state is, though, far from that for which they have long held out: comprising just 75 percent of the West Bank (with barely contiguous territory joined by highways), plus Gaza (which will be linked by a tunnel) and some additional territory from the Negev. In place of their dream of a capital in East Jerusalem, the Palestinians would receive only the suburban area of Abu Dis beyond the security barrier.

Israel, however, is earmarked the strategically and militarily important Jordan Valley – territory in the far east of the West Bank which borders Jordan – and sovereignty over Jerusalem. Moreover, not only do the main settlement blocs, which lay close to, but to the east of, the 1967 lines and within the security barrier, become part of Israel, so, too, do all other settlements dotted throughout the West Bank (seventy-seven percent of the Israeli settlers live in the blocs). These include 15 isolated settlements, deep inside a potential Palestinian state, which are designated as “Israeli enclave communities”.

LFI statement on the peace plan:

"The Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the vital cause of a two-state solution is too important for Donald Trump's blatantly political games. As the leader of the Israeli Labor party has made clear, “unilateral annexations or steps that undermine the concept of two states, living peacefully side by side is a recipe for further trouble and turmoil”. Only direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians - ones that will involve compromise and painful concessions by both sides - can lead to a lasting peace. This plan clearly fails that test and we encourage both sides to restart those talks."

“Their intended permanent presence further undermines the self-governing credibility of the envisioned Palestinian state, again reducing the likelihood of any future Palestinian leadership returning to the negotiating table,” argued the editor of the Times of Israel, David Horowitz, in a column critiquing Trump's proposals.

The Palestinian state, which would be demilitarised, under overall Israeli security control, and lacking control of its airspace, would also only come into existence if it passed certain criteria, including a free press, free elections, religious freedom and an independent judiciary, and if the Palestinians agreed to recognise Israel as a Jewish state. The demand of a complete “right to return” – a claim that Palestinians and their descendants who were displaced from Israel in the 1948-9 War of Independence should be allowed to settle in the Jewish state itself, as opposed to a future Palestinian state – is also refused.

Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and author of the plan, has defended its contents by suggesting that it would grant Palestinians twice as much land as they currently have available to them. Under the terms of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority has

security and civilian control over Area A, which makes up some 18 percent of the West Bank, and civilian control over Area B, which makes up roughly 22 percent of the West Bank. Israel controls the remaining 60 percent known as Area C. (a 2017 Palestinian census found that the number of Palestinians living in Area C of the West Bank, which is under exclusive Israeli control, was 393,163 out of a total West Bank Palestinian population of 2,881,687).

Kushner has also argued that the network of “bridges and tunnels” envisaged by the plan means that Palestinians would be able to travel from north to south of their state without going through any Israeli checkpoints. He has also hinted that the US might be prepared to countenance changes to the plan. “If there are things they [the Palestinians] want to change, if they don’t like where we drew the lines, they should come and tell us,” he suggested in a weekend interview. US secretary of state Mike Pompeo has similarly argued that the Palestinians are “free to come up with a counter offer if that’s what they think is appropriate”.

The Americans have also tried to sweeten Trump’s much-vaunted “deal of the century” by promising the Palestinians duty-free port facilities at Haifa and Ashdod on Israel’s Mediterranean coast and nearly \$30bn in economic assistance which, the plan says, would double the Palestinian GDP over the next decade and halve the poverty rate.

The US proposal also demands that Israel halts settlement-building in the land allocated for a Palestinian state during the planned four-year negotiating period. Kushner has appeared to condition US acceptance of Israeli sovereignty over current settlements “in exchange for them [Israelis] stopping growing [the settlements]”.

But the scale of the reduced aspirations Trump is demanding the Palestinians accept is hard to conceal: barely 10 years ago, in 2008, former prime minister Ehud Olmert proposed a Palestinian state on almost the entire territory of the West Bank with compensating land swaps for the 6.3 percent he wished to annex. Abbas has admitted that he rejected the proposal.

Indeed, Kushner’s claim that his plan represents the first time Israel has agreed to the establishment of a Palestinian state, a map conceptualising the land it was willing to allocate for that state, and allowing the Palestinian state to have its capital in East Jerusalem is palpably false. Both Olmert and former prime minister Ehud Barak held extensive negotiations with the PA on the basis of those same principles.

Netanyahu overplays his hand

Next month, Israeli voters are facing an unprecedented third general election in just under a year. On each occasion as Israelis have prepared to go to the polls, Trump has intervened to assist Netanyahu: recognising the Golan Heights as part of the Jewish State shortly before the April 2019 election; proposing an ill-defined military alliance with Israel on the eve of the September 2018 vote; and now releasing his peace plan.

As on the two previous occasions, however, Trump’s assistance may not give Netanyahu the boost he needs to break the electoral deadlock which has consumed Israel for the past year.

In the immediate aftermath of the White House unveiling, Netanyahu announced that Israel would move immediately to annex the Jordan Valley and its West Bank settlements. Within 24 hours, the hopes that the prime minister had raised on the Israeli right were dashed. While Trump's ambassador to the US, David Friedman, publicly suggested that "Israel does not have to wait at all", Kushner moved to block Netanyahu, bluntly stating that the administration opposed any immediate annexation or moves before the 2 March elections. Netanyahu was forced this week to row back and say there would be no steps until a new government is in place after the elections.

The confusing messages from the White House appear to reflect different camps within the administration. On the one hand, Friedman is a long-time backer of the settler movement; Kushner, by contrast, has been a strong proponent of the so-called "outside-in" approach – securing an agreement between Israel and moderate Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE – in order to break the log-jam in the conflict between the Jewish state and the Palestinians. Immediate unilateral moves by Israel, Kushner is believed to fear, are likely to scupper any hopes of the Arab states backing his plan.

But delay looks likely to cost Netanyahu dear. As Haaretz columnist Yossi Verter argued last weekend, the prime minister must now explain himself to his disappointed electoral base – the settlers, the Likud right and his allies in the Yamina bloc: "The false hope he has given them was replaced with painful disillusionment. The mania turned to depression. The goal became an own goal." Defence minister and Yamina head, Naftali Bennett, voiced the fear of many: "What is put off until to after the election won't happen, we all understand that."

For the Israeli right, there is another angle, too. Under Trump's plan, in order to annex the West Bank settlements and the Jordan Valley, they have to accept the prospect – however distant – of something they have long resisted: a Palestinian state. "The settlers, leader of the political right and Netanyahu's Likud party has agreed to 'swallow' the bitter pill of a future Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem by washing it down with the elixir of annexation," wrote Ben Caspit of the Al-Monitor website. "On the morning after, they found themselves facing Israeli recognition of a Palestinian state, but without the annexation, which had been postponed to an unknown date 'after the elections'."



As a means to regain the votes of the 300,000 Likud and right-wing voters who backed Netanyahu in April 2019, but abandoned the prime minister five months later, the Trump peace plan appears to be falling short. Even in the immediate aftermath of the president's announcement, opinion polls suggested that the centrist Blue and White opposition party headed by Benny Gantz remains narrowly ahead and Netanyahu no clearer to assembling the Knesset majority that has eluded him for the past year.

The pressures facing Netanyahu from the right were evident on Saturday when the Yesha Council, the umbrella organisation representing the mayors of West Bank settlements, released a statement which backed immediate annexation but made clear its strong opposition to a Palestinian state.

For Netanyahu, the weeks remaining until polling day could be perilous, political commentator Anshel Pfeffer has suggested. "If annexation is put on indefinite hold, Israelis will have more time to pay attention to the allegations against their prime minister," he wrote. "Hard-right voters will be disappointed in his kowtowing to the Americans on this, while more moderate right-wingers, who could be persuaded to vote for someone like Gantz, will begin to ask whether a leader mired in a corruption case can even be trusted to handle the diplomatic opportunity that Trump has granted Israel."

Gantz himself is determined to dampen any political benefit that Netanyahu might accrue. He has opposed immediate annexation and, while welcoming Trump's proposals, suggested that he wouldn't act in the unilateral manner Netanyahu is proposing. "I will advance the plan immediately after elections," he stated last week, "in full coordination with the governments of the US, Jordan, Egypt, others in the region and the Palestinians."

Gantz's potential coalition partners on the left have also signalled a more cautious approach. Former leadership contender and senior Labor MK Itzik Shmuli labelled the prime minister's plans "the fraud of the century." "The immediate annexation of wide territories and isolated settlements, that do not contribute to security, negates the important recognition of the two-state solution, rejects any chance to achieve separation and will bring about the fatal demand for a single state, which contradicts our national and security interests," he argued.

A survey released this week which was conducted prior to the Trump plan being published underlined further the potential difficulties Netanyahu faces. It showed that 45 percent of Israelis would accept the establishment of a Palestinian state as part of any US proposals, with 38 percent opposed. Support was, however, much higher among left-wing and centrist Israeli voters than among those who back parties which support the prime minister, showing the plan's potential to split his coalition. Seventy-nine percent of those who voted for the left-wing Democratic Camp in September supported a two-state solution as part of the plan, so, too, did 67 percent of Labor-Gesher voters, and 65 percent of those who supported Blue and White. Those who backed Avigdor Liberman's right-wing secularist Yisrael Beiteunu party were divided with 51 percent in favour. However, only 33 percent of Likud voters and 23.5 percent of the pro-settler Yamina alliance endorsed the proposal.

No, No, No: the view from Ramallah and beyond

Given the content of the plan, the Palestinians' rejection of it was both swift and predictable. Mahmoud Abbas called Trump's proposals the "slap of the century" and pledged to consign them to "the dustbins of history". "We say a thousand times: No, no and no to the 'deal of the century,'" the president said when the proposals were published. Abbas also declared that "Jerusalem is not for sale" and the Palestinian people's "rights are not for sale or bartering." "Will we accept a state without Jerusalem? It is impossible for any Palestinian, Arab, Muslim or Christian child to accept that," he said.

Abbas has since threatened to cut all ties, including, crucially, security cooperation, with Israel. This coordination ranges from information-sharing about terrorist cells in the West Bank to coordination between police forces.

However, the president has repeatedly made such threats without carrying them through and subsequently appeared to moderate his stance. Security cooperation thus currently remains in place.

The Palestinians' rejection of the US proposals has been echoed by the unanimous rejection of the Arab League and the subsequent opposition of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. The Arab League said that Trump's plan did not "satisfy the minimum of the rights and aspirations of the Palestinian people". Instead, the Arab League reiterated its support for the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative which endorsed a Palestinian state on the 1967 lines with East Jerusalem as its capital. This position came as a blow to the US, which had hoped some leading Arab states would pressurise the Palestinians to accept the proposals.

Nonetheless, it was notable that many Arab foreign ministers attending the meeting refrained from criticising the Trump administration directly, with those of the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Morocco suggesting that the plan could be the basis for talks.

In reality, as Mohamed Abdelaziz has written, the Arab world has a range of views on the Trump proposals. Egypt, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and Morocco all issued statements offering "qualified" interest in the plan, with Jordan sounding a more skeptical note and Algeria, Tunisia, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen all voicing strong opposition. It has also been reported that the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Bahrain, the three Middle Eastern states which sent representatives to the White House launch event, were misled by the US about the contents of the proposals.

But, as Abdelaziz has suggested, Arab reaction to the plan does not appear to be based solely on the merits or otherwise of the proposals. "The key new yet hidden star in this constellation, however, is Iran," he wrote. "Those Arab states most afraid of Iran and desirous of American protection against it, namely the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), are the ones now expressing cautious support for the U.S. proposal. Conversely, those Arab states most subject to Iran's suzerainty already—Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—are the ones most virulently opposed to the newly announced U.S. design."

Fear of Iranian expansionism has driven a reshaping of attitudes towards the Jewish state among some Arab states who do not yet recognise Israel. This, however, may be put at risk if

Netanyahu continues to pursue efforts to unilateral annexation efforts. As two veteran US peace process negotiators, Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, warned last week: “Many of the region’s leaders now believe that, if the United States retreats from the Mideast, Israel is not only a necessary bulwark against the threats Arab states face but also a potentially useful ally. Unfortunately, the willingness of ... Netanyahu to push annexation for his near-term political benefit could damage the emerging alignment between Israel and the Arab states. Arab leaders certainly won’t want to look as though they are even indirectly helping Israel take what they consider to be Palestinian territory.”

A chance for two states?

Does the Trump plan, however one-sided and politically motivated, offer anything by way of comfort for supporters of a two-state solution? Noa Landau of Haaretz believes that, beyond Netanyahu’s rush to annexation, a shift has occurred which may later have profound effects. “Looked at from another, longer-term angle ... something else interesting happened on Tuesday: Large portions of the Israeli right effectively renounced the dream of retaining the entire Land of Israel. In principle, they accepted the idea of dividing it in exchange for 30 percent of the West Bank. This in-principle recognition that it’s actually possible to accept a diplomatic deal that divides the land if it’s just good enough is important for the more distant future. Because now, it’s clear everyone understands that the argument isn’t about whether a Palestinian state should arise alongside Israel, but only at what price.”