



Trump's Plan Forces Palestinian Choices

January 31, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman** *Al-Hurra Digital*

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It's your move, Mahmoud Abbas. That's the basic message behind the Trump administration's long-awaited "deal of the century," which was unveiled publicly on Tuesday at a joint press conference between President Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. As expected, the proposal is extremely favorable to Israel on issues like Jerusalem, settlements and security. But it also holds out the promise of both statehood and prosperity for the Palestinians – if the Palestinian Authority and its Chairman rise to the occasion.

Here, it's useful to recognize the logic behind the White House's new peace bid.

First, Trump's deal is designed to exploit the eroding position of the Palestinians in regional affairs. A decade ago, the question of peace with the Palestinians was a staple of Israeli politics, and officials there understood that they needed to make efforts to negotiate as a prerequisite for any meaningful engagement with the rest of the Arab world. The Palestinians, in turn, could rely on the Arab world to put pressure on Israel and the United States on their behalf.

Not so now. Over the past decade, shared fears over a rising Iran have nudged Israel and the Arab states closer together. This, in turn, has enabled the Israeli government to engage with the Arab world independent of progress on the Palestinian track. That situation still obtains. The problem of Iran remains an overriding one for regional governments, making continued alignment with Israel and the Trump administration a logical strategic choice.

The White House has translated this proximity into a broad push for Arab endorsement of its plans for Middle East peace, with significant results. At Tuesday's press conference, the ambassadors of Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates were prominently on display – a sure sign of their governments' backing of the U.S. proposal. Since then, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Morocco have all publicly signaled their support of the American plan as well. In the process, they've made clear that the Palestinians won't automatically be able to rely on Arab support if they decline to engage constructively.

Second, the Trump deal holds out the promise of an unprecedented economic windfall for the Palestinians. The White House's vision "will deliver a massive commercial investment of \$50 billion into the new Palestinian state," the President promised in his remarks on Tuesday. (The magnitude of the sum is noteworthy; it represents more than three times the total annual GDP of the Palestinian Territories, which currently stands at some \$15 billion.) But, Trump also made clear, this would only happen if the Palestinian Authority takes concrete steps to combat corruption, accept Israel's existence as a Jewish state, and actively disarm Hamas and other rejectionist groups – things that Palestinian leaders have failed to do so far.

Such a bargain is likely to be an exceedingly attractive one for ordinary Palestinians. As the United Nations has documented, economic conditions in the Palestinian Territories have worsened considerably over the past two years, and are now approaching "crisis." This failure to thrive can't simply be blamed on the Israeli "occupation." Rather, the lack of real, meaningful economic development plans by either the PA or Hamas have impoverished the Palestinians and left them overwhelmingly dependent on international largesse.

Trump's plan seeks to change this state of affairs, both via stepped-up foreign direct investment and through a massive jobs creation program. And now that it is on the table, Palestinian leaders will be at pains to explain to their people exactly why they have rejected such a lucrative offer – and what they plan to do to generate domestic prosperity instead.

Finally, the Trump deal effectively resuscitates the notion of a "two state solution." That idea – which envisions an Israeli state and a Palestinian one living side-by-side in peace and security – was once a mainstay of regional peacemaking. But in recent years, it has declined in popularity as more and more people in Israel and abroad became convinced that the Palestinians were unwilling to come to grips with Israel's existence.

The new U.S. plan effectively forces that decision upon the Palestinians. As its particulars make clear, both statehood and prosperity are indeed possible, provided the Palestinian leadership does concrete things to moderate. What is equally clear, however, is that if they fail to do so over the next several years, the Palestinians risk being left behind as Israel and the U.S. move on to make security, political and economic arrangements without them.

So far, the Palestinian leadership has responded predictably to Trump's proposal. Chairman Abbas refused to even speak with the U.S. president ahead of the plan's rollout, and in its aftermath has cursed Trump and rejected his terms outright. That sort of rhetoric once played well in the Arab world. But Abbas and company are liable to find that there is far less appetite for it now. Quite simply, the regional conversation regarding Israeli-Palestinian peace has evolved, and Trump's plan acknowledges that reality. It also lays out a fresh way forward – if the parties are willing to take it.

Israel, at least, seems ready to do so. In his remarks Tuesday, Prime Minister Netanyahu channeled the legendary Israeli statesman Abba Eban when reassured the American president that "Israel will not miss this opportunity." The question is, will the Palestinians?