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Moving on from Trump's plan for the Middle East

The international community needs to counter Trump's so-called 'Deal of the Century' with its own peace initiative

Trump's vision for Israeli-Palestinian peace was supposed to be the ultimate gift for Netanyahu's electoral campaign, rather than the ultimate deal for Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution. The timing of its publication – a month ahead of the Israeli elections – seemed highly motivated by political considerations. The content of the plan – reportedly closely coordinated (and maybe even shaped) by top Netanyahu aides – was supposed to give a green light to Netanyahu's aspirations to annex territory in the West Bank prior to the elections. And the anticipated Palestinian rejection of the plan was hoped to pave the way for a bilateral breakthrough between Israel and a major Arab country, again – before the elections.

However, in the immediate weeks following the presentation of the plan – these did not happen. The US administration stopped Netanyahu's efforts for rapid annexation, and by doing so created tensions within Israel's right-wing bloc. Voting intentions of Israelis remained largely unchanged following the publication of the plan, according to multiple public opinion polls. Netanyahu's rival Benny Gantz, who the prime minister tried to trap by dragging him to Washington with him to the introduction of the plan, managed to handle the situation and gain some political benefits from it. And Arab leaders kept refusing to publicly meet Netanyahu, like they did prior to the two Israeli elections in 2019 and despite American pressures.

The Trump plan, however, was greeted with cheer by the Israeli mainstream. It was termed by many as the most pro-Israeli plan ever and was warmly embraced by Gantz' Blue and White party, the main contender to Netanyahu's Likud. Voices against the plan came almost only from the Israeli left, whose power is diminishing. But even among the left there was cautious not to aggressively oppose the US president, at times even congratulating him for the efforts his administration

undertook to devise the plan.

A two-state solution is still the way forward

International responses were also mild in nature. They reflected the general lack of involvement by the international community in the Israeli-Palestinian issue since Trump took office and a reluctance to challenge the US president. Countries in Europe and the Arab world issued statements welcoming the Americans for their efforts and promising to study the content of the plan. Such statements were the ones that the US administration was pushing for. The American goal was to prevent clear and immediate rejection of the plan and this has been largely achieved (there were exceptions like Ireland's quick response against the plan).

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In the weeks that followed, multi-national organisations (the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the African Union) made joint non-binding statements opposing the plan. Within the EU, internal divisions continued to prevent joint declarations by all 27 member states, as has been the case since 2016. EU High Representative Borrell thus issued a statement reflecting his own views, while European UN Security Council members reaffirmed the traditional European position on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

The overall nature of these responses reinforced Netanyahu's narrative that the international community does not care much about the Palestinian issue. His claim is that Arab countries are willing to improve ties with Israel even without progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; and that Europe is no longer a relevant actor, now that some member states are willing to block initiatives in Brussels on Israel's behalf. Because of the weak international opposition to the plan, those in Israel who criticise Trump's vision are often accused of being anachronistic and of not accepting the changes taking place. A common thought among Israelis is that if the world does not care that much anymore about the Palestinians, why should we.

The further consolidation of this mindset might become a dangerous consequence of the Trump plan. Advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace and

a two-state solution should be a high-level priority for the next Israeli government. It's crucial for Israel's ability to maintain both its Jewish and democratic character, to live in peace, security and prosperity and to truly belong and integrate in its Middle Eastern, European and Mediterranean neighborhood. It's also the right thing to do in terms of fulfilling Palestinian national aspirations.

Challenges and opportunities

However, doing so will not become any easier. The Israeli public is largely indifferent to the issue; the Palestinian public is losing faith in prospects of a real Palestinian state; settlement expansion in the West Bank is making the two-state solution more difficult to obtain and implement; and the ongoing split between the West Bank and Gaza casts a shadow over prospects for future progress towards peace.

These are major challenges that pro-peace Israeli, Palestinian and international leaders should tackle. Prospects for political change in Israel later this year – even if not representing a clear ideological shift – might provide an opportunity to begin doing so. Should a different American administration take office in January 2021, even more opportunities will emerge. Pro-peace actors should already plan towards such scenarios and begin to take action. For the past three years their primary focus was on the release of the Trump plan, what it will include and how to react. Now, after its publication, it's the time to move on, brush the plan aside and advance steps that can bring peace.

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There's a variety of steps that international actors can take: their primary goal should be to prevent Israeli annexation of territories in the West Bank, through voicing clear opposition. They should also keep the Israeli-Palestinian issue high on their agenda – especially when engaging with Israeli officials – even when they have more pressing priorities and when they do not envision immediate progress. A counter-document to the Trump plan, including alternative principles for a final-status peace agreement, should be published as to not let the Trump plan remain 'the only game in town'.

What Europeans should do

The EU's foreign policy chief Borrell is showing willingness to put the Israeli-Palestinian issue back on the Foreign Affairs Council's agenda and

to seek conclusions supported by all 27 member states. However, this remains a difficult task and, in any case, European countries should bypass the paralysis caused by divisions among EU member states by acting in smaller coalitions of like-minded actors. Borrell should be supportive of this line of action as well.

Moreover, a new international mechanism to support Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking should be set up – whether officially or unofficially – to enable different international actors (not only European) to coordinate efforts, with participation of pro-peace Israelis and Palestinians. Such a mechanism should implement the plan agreed upon to introduce Israelis and Palestinians to a coordinated international package of political and economic incentives for peace. Finally, increased international support and recognition should be given to pro-peace civil society groups so they can more effectively build positive interactions between Israelis and Palestinians.

These steps can generate hope, set up new dialogue channels and craft innovative policy proposals – all of which are much-needed components on the path towards peace. They will demonstrate how local and international actors can chart a real vision towards peace and can take action together to advance its implementation. It would be the most suitable response to the Trump plan.

Also read the interview with former IDF commander Yehuda Shaul who says 'That's not the Israel I want.'



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