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Life in the red zone

The Trump plan divides the Gaza Strip, perpetuating the suffering. Meanwhile, the UN Security Council is playing along

In mid-October, Donald Trump presented his 'Gaza peace plan' with great fanfare. But even its first stage, a 'ceasefire' in the conflict, hardly deserves the name. With Israeli attacks occurring on an almost daily basis, more than 260 Palestinians have already been killed, many of them on the 'yellow line' that the Israeli army has marked out to delineate its occupation zone. Although this is significantly fewer casualties than before, the attacks are not over.

The newly adopted UN Security Council Resolution 2803 aims to contribute to stabilisation, yet it provides just as few answers to key questions as Trump's plan. Moreover, the de facto division of Gaza and newly created parallel structures threaten to lead to a dangerous impasse.

Over a million people, most of them children, remain unprotected and without shelter in Gaza, forced to live in makeshift accommodation amid the rubble. We can already see what will happen when heavy rainfall and storms begin to set in with the onset of winter: tents and temporary structures were recently flooded, and the few possessions that some people were able to salvage during their flight have now been lost. The weakened population is suffering from the cold and diseases.

It is particularly alarming that the humanitarian aid promised after the ceasefire has been insufficient to date. Gaza remains largely sealed off: food supplies are barely reaching the area, and building materials and medical supplies are almost completely unavailable. Even after the ceasefire, Israel continues to deny international human rights organisations and foreign journalists access to Gaza — a course of action for which there is no justification. The reason is obvious: the fear that further alleged Israeli war crimes could be exposed. As a precautionary measure, an Israeli spokeswoman has already – in advance – described any future reporting as 'propaganda'.

Back to a broken formula

Now, the US is set to take on a stronger leadership role on the ground together with the newly established Civil-Military Coordination Centre (CMCC) located in southern Israel. The centre is tasked with monitoring the ceasefire, coordinating aid and supporting the ongoing stabilisation process. In addition to US and Israeli personnel, numerous other countries are represented at the centre; Germany, for example, is sending three high-ranking officers as well as representatives from the Foreign Office. Palestinian representatives, on the other hand, are not granted access. And Palestinian self-determination is just as absent from the agenda as are justice, the investigation of war crimes or any form of international jurisdiction.

With this extensive civil-military cooperation, the US is bringing back a development model that has already failed miserably in Afghanistan and Iraq. And yet, it would have been entirely possible to open up the Gaza Strip and grant all UN organisations the urgently needed unrestricted access without resorting to this construct. Of course, this would have required pressure on the Israeli government, which has declared the United Nations an enemy and subjected the Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), in particular, to bans and an unprecedented smear campaign.

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Meanwhile, a recent report by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) not only confirmed how crucial UNRWA is for providing aid to the people of Gaza, but also made it clear that there is no evidence to support the far-reaching allegations against the organisation. However, the ICJ's clear statement has not prompted those who have slandered the UN organisation with false accusations – such as members of the German Bundestag from various parties, especially the conservative CDU, who even called for the aid agency to be dissolved – to apologise or change their minds. On the contrary, apparently under pressure from these parties, the German government abstained for the first time in a vote on the extension of UNRWA's mandate. This sends a devastating foreign policy signal, especially at a time when the Palestinian relief agency is needed more urgently than ever.

Resolution 2803, which has now been passed in the UN Security Council under pressure from the US, likewise ignores UNRWA and assigns the United Nations a secondary role at best. Instead, it effectively confirms the vague processes and non-transparent institutions of the Trump plan. Rarely has the Security Council passed a resolution that is so poorly crafted and at the same time so massively marginalises the role of the United Nations. It was supported by the majority of members – with Russia and China abstaining – probably due to massive pressure from the US on the one hand and concerns about being held responsible themselves on the other. After all, the Trump plan is currently the only concept to which the international community refers at all.

Apart from the usual reference to earlier resolutions – including, in theory, Resolution 242 of 1967, which calls for Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories – Resolution 2803 contains no references to international law or international institutions. Instead, right at the beginning, the resolution welcomes Trump's flowery 'historic declaration' on 'enduring peace and prosperity' in Gaza and the Middle East. The prospect of a Palestinian state, on the other hand, is pushed to the end. If the Palestinian Authority has 'faithfully [carried out its reform programme] and Gaza redevelopment has advanced, the conditions may finally be in place for a credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood,' reads the central sentence written in the subjunctive.

This also massively weakens the Palestinian Authority — at a time when Israel's Security Minister Ben-Gvir is publicly calling for the assassination of Palestinian ministers and the imprisonment of President Abbas if the idea of a Palestinian state were to be pursued. Although this is the most extreme position, Netanyahu and many other Israeli politicians are also inciting hatred against the Palestinian Authority and categorically ruling out a Palestinian state.

New lines of separation

As part of the 'Trump plan', the US has created parallel structures that have now been approved by the international community: the CMCC, the 'Board of Peace' and a technocratic committee for Gaza to be appointed in the future. The Trump plan has also established a division of Gaza that now threatens to become permanent. As a result of the war, Israel has not withdrawn from the entire Gaza Strip, but continues to occupy a wide strip in the east and south — a total of 53 per cent, i.e. the larger part. The vast majority of Gaza's internally displaced population, on the other hand, lives in the remaining area of the Gaza Strip.

Without any irony, US officials are already talking about a 'green zone'

— for years, this term referred to the relatively safe part of Baghdad where the US embassy was located, while attacks and violence were part of everyday life in the rest of the city. The ‘red zone’ remains under Hamas control. Neither the Trump plan nor Resolution 2803 offer an answer to how this dilemma can be resolved.

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In the occupied ‘green zone’, the Israeli army has already destroyed more than 1 500 buildings. Gardens, orchards and agricultural land have also been destroyed. Large-scale destruction has also taken place in the vicinity of Gaza City, which is hardly compatible with a ‘ceasefire’. Now the rubble can be cleared away and reconstruction can begin. However, this reconstruction is likely to completely ignore the needs of the Palestinian people and instead be shaped by the investment interests of the US and its partners in the Gulf. Meanwhile, the vast majority of the population remains trapped as internally displaced persons in the completely destroyed ‘red zone’, where reconstruction is not possible.

Given the ongoing attacks, Israel’s insufficient cooperation in delivering aid and the escalating violence in the West Bank, the German government’s decision to resume arms exports without exception is worrying and counterproductive. Instead of investing all efforts in the vague, partly undemocratic and non-transparent parallel structures of the Trump plan, German and European foreign policy should urge the US to take concrete steps to improve the situation on the ground: unrestricted access for aid organisations and UN agencies such as UNRWA, for journalists and diplomats; unhindered import of aid supplies; the investigation of war crimes; freedom of movement for people from Gaza who need to leave for medical care or other reasons, as well as a binding assurance that they can return to Gaza.

By abstaining on the UNRWA mandate, the German government has further weakened the organisation’s ability to act. If there is no fundamental commitment to the territorial integrity of the Gaza Strip as an integral part of the Palestinian territories, and if the division of the territory instead becomes a permanent state of affairs, this will not only make a future Palestinian state impossible. It will also only be a matter of time then before new conflicts and violence break out in the region.



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