PODCAST | POLITICS

Trump and Israel's Plans for Gaza with Diana Buttu

By: Diana Buttu · February, 2025

The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Diana Buttu 0:00

When you look inside Israeli society and you see the number of Israelis who are actually supporting what Trump is saying, it's very high. And it's high because they've never had to be held to account for their war crimes and for the Nakba and for any of the things that they've done. But I don't think that it's packaged in this nice bow that the Israelis think it is. If these 15 months have taught us anything, it is that Palestinians can disrupt, and they did disrupt and will continue to disrupt.

Yara Hawari 0:30

This episode is the second in a three-part series between Al-Shabaka and Mondoweiss. Diana Buttu, Palestinian lawyer and board member of Al-Shabaka, and Yumna Patel, editor-in-chief of Mondoweiss, discussed US President Trump's statements on Gaza during Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's trip to the US and his calls for a continuation of the genocide through ethnic cleansing. They also discuss the ceasefire and the challenges facing Palestinians in Gaza today.

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miss anything.

Yumna Patel 1:10

Diana, thanks for being here.

Diana Buttu 1:12

Thanks for having me, Yumna.

Yumna Patel 1:14

So we are here to talk about the ceasefire in Gaza, what the situation is like on the ground right now three weeks in, and the prospects for reconstruction and rebuilding Gaza, which, as we know, has been decimated after 16 months of genocide. But before we do that, we've got to talk about Trump and Netanyahu.

So we are speaking fresh off the heels of this meeting between Trump and Netanyahu at the White House. We'll get more into the specifics of what was said, but I want to start off by asking you, what was going through your mind when you were watching that press conference yesterday? And what were your initial reactions?

Diana Buttu 1:55

So, being in Palestine, I woke up to the news. I didn't actually watch it live. And I'm kind of glad that I didn't watch it live, because being able to watch it and pause it gave me a little bit of a perspective of being able to read the room in its entirety. And so there were a few things. The first is that Netanyahu had this grin, like the Cheshire cat grin, where he looks as though he just swallowed a canary and he's gotten everything he wants, and he did. And then on the other hand, Trump was specifically Trump, meaning that he's not very bright, very driven by his own ego, and very driven by his own past experiences.

And so getting into the actual specifics of just the optics of it, it looked like Netanyahu was the one who was in charge and it looked as though Trump was just fudging his way along. And what's also interesting is that if you're watching the whole press conference and everything he said, Trump was reading off of a set of notes. I've never seen him read off of a set of notes, so all these things were the things that, for me, again, because I woke up to it, were very interesting as a perspective.

Now, getting into the substance is I think the more interesting part of it, and on the substance, there's a lot to say. The first is that, and this might sound odd, but this was Trump's way of saving Netanyahu. And I say this because Netanyahu is viewed inside Israel as a failed politician. Remember, he's facing a corruption trial, and he was very unpopular all throughout 2023, so for him, prolonging the genocide was to his benefit.

When the ceasefire was signed, Israelis very much looked at this as a sign of defeat because it is. And that, coupled with the image of the nearly 400,000 Palestinians going back to the north, led Israelis to say, What are they going back to? I thought we decimated it, which they did. Then they realized that this was their symbol of defeat.

For Trump to come out with this statement of this is what we're going to do, and people are going to have to leave, it's the only way that he can revive Netanyahu, and that's why he's saying it. And at the same time, it leaves you thinking, if 15 months of the worst of humanity was meted out on people in Gaza with all of the bombs and all of the different types of weaponry and the quadcopters, the starvation, not allowing humanitarian aid, cutting off electricity and water in public hospitals, if that didn't lead to all of these people fleeing, then what is it that America and Israel are going to do to affect this, they have no alternative but leave.

So on the one hand, it's a way to revive Netanyahu, and on the other hand, you have to step back and think about not the practicalities of it, but what does it mean? What does it mean when the only way that you can have a leader survive is by advocating for ethnic cleansing? And if they truly believe in it, what is it that they have in store for Gaza? What is it they're gonna do? And so this leads me to think that this is a way of them blocking any form of reconstruction of Gaza because you know Trump's gonna be one of these like spoiled children. If he can't own it then nobody else can do anything there, and Trump, coupled with Israel, I feel, are going to make sure that Gaza doesn't get reconstructed at all.

Yumna Patel 6:04

It's a really interesting takeaway and it makes sense why you would zero in on that. The repeated comments about, it's devastated, we've just got to level it, it could be the quote unquote Riviera of the Middle East, which that in and of itself we can talk about that, but so many things were said yesterday and as you pointed out, people are naturally focusing on this comment of Trump saying that the US is taking it over, and I think that a lot of people like myself included, we don't know what to make of Trump's comments a lot of the time, are these just statements, more of the usual kind of unhinged rhetoric by the president, or are these indications of real policy measures that we should be concerned about?

And that's kind of what you're getting at is these are concerning and make you not think about the logistics. Think about what it means that this is what is being advocated as a solution.

Diana Buttu 7:08

And there's also something deeper, and it's troublesome, and I want to just spend a moment talking about it. It's this idea, as my friend Daryl Lee calls it, terraforming, which I call terrafantasy. And this terrafantasy is, we just need to level the place and build anew, right? And that is ignoring the history of Gaza.

Gaza has one of the oldest churches in the world, a place that's been inhabited for thousands of years.

And so it ignores the history and the civilization, but then it also ignores why Gaza is Gaza. And the reason that it is Gaza is because 80 percent of the people who live in Gaza are not from Gaza. It's that they fled to Gaza because Israel took over their homes and their lands. And so if we're talking about quote unquote solutions, isn't the better solution to have them move back to their homes and lands that are just across the open-air prison, places like Sderot, places like where the Nova Festival was?

But then there's also another level to it, which is, he talks about it as though some sort of disaster befell it. Like, there was a hurricane, something happened, it was just bad luck, there are people, there are poor people, and because of that, we just need to clean it out. But it's not bad luck, it's calculated. And Zionism is, I think, as Mohammed al-Kurd says, it's one hell of a drug. Because it is. And it's such an ideology, the only way that it can be implemented is through ethnic cleansing. That's the only way that it can be implemented.

The other part of this, Yumna, is that this terra fantasy is not new. I remember as far back as 2005, when the Israelis finally pulled out of Gaza, they took away the settlements, but they kept the place enclosed and besieged. They start talking about, we need to turn Gaza into Dubai. Even Hillary Clinton said it could have been Dubai. And then at a different point, it became Singapore, but then they realized that people didn't know what Singapore is really about. So they went back to Dubai, right? And now it's the Riviera of the Middle East and all of these things.

And so these are not new. This has always been their fantasy because they have no connection to the land, because for them, this is a colonial project, and you can just erase things and you can put up something new and you can erase churches

and bomb them to smithereens because they're settlers. These are colonizers.

And the policy kit was as far back as 2005 in terms of the Israelis; it was picked up by Kushner. Kushner was talking about it all of this time, but then there was an important part in October of 2023. The first was, I believe it was Danny Ayalon, who gave an interview with Mark Lamont Hill on Upfront with Mark Lamont Hill. And he talked about ethnically cleansing Gaza, making it smaller in size, thinner in population, and people going to Sinai with the Gulf states paying for it. And nobody interrogated him. Mark Lamont Hill did, but no other journalist interrogated him or Netanyahu or their policies.

And then magically, two weeks later, we get this document, this White House document, asking for money, 9.5 billion dollars to relocate Palestinians outside of Gaza. So all of this is not new but it just shows you how this policy has been shaping and developing over time.

Yumna Patel 11:14

I'm glad you talked about that because, like you said, this isn't a new policy. The policy of ethnic cleansing is what Israel was founded upon. But in terms of the most recent context of what we're talking about, the groundwork for all of this was laid and started by the Biden administration. It's not a new policy, and the comments from Trump are not new. Since he assumed office, he's been talking about: we've just got to clear the Palestinians out, send them to some neighboring countries, Jordan, Egypt. They'll do it, whatever it is.

And what's been so striking about these comments and the way that it's being received by the media is there hasn't, at least from the mainstream media, been an acknowledgment or an attempt to push back on the reality that this is just blatant ethnic cleansing, that is what is being called for. Instead, we've been seeing when he makes these comments, people jump into questions around, like the logistics. Well, how are you going to do it? How is that going to happen? That

just normalizes this premise that it's okay to even think about this, it's okay to even think about the idea of ethnically cleansing these people and I think that that subtlety is also just really important to understanding the moment that we're in and the willingness of the Western society, the media, everybody outside of Palestine to just accept we can do with Palestinians what we want to do with them. It furthers this idea that they don't have this claim over their land.

Diana Buttu 13:10

That's the irony of all of this, and you see this being now touted even within the gaslighting liberal circles within Israel, Oh, it's so difficult for Palestinians in Gaza. And so yes, of course, they should get a better life, but you are the one who created this condition. And their better life is when you leave, it's what's going to be their better life.

But it's this; we're here and we're here to stay and we just have to find a better life for Palestinians. And it's because they don't understand, a friend of mine and I were talking about this today, that people don't understand the idea of attachment to land. But I think that's bigger. I think that they don't understand attachment to community and they don't understand that the Nakba wasn't just the taking over of land. It was the destruction of communities. It was the destruction of the places that people knew. It was the taking over of the land, destroying the houses, but destroying these communities.

And that's the part that I don't think a lot of the Western media is understanding because for them, it's all about the logistics. So, is Egypt agreeing? Is Jordan agreeing? How are you going to move them? How this and how that? But they don't understand that what they're pushing is ethnic cleansing and normalizing it. But B, is that they don't understand that this was caused by Israel. And it wasn't caused by Israel just now with bombs. It was caused by Israel in 1948 with the Nakba.

Yara Hawari 14:43

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Yumna Patel 14:56

I mean, what you're describing is this sick irony, that was what was on full display earlier. You talked about this smug kind of look and smile that Netanyahu had on his face the whole time. And people were kind of commenting on this on social media about the fact that Trump is over here talking about the bad luck that has befallen the people in Gaza. It's just destroyed. There's no life for them there so we just got to clear them out and next to him, smiling is the man who oversaw that destruction and created the reality with the help of the United States to create the reality in which now we're saying, well, there's nothing left there for them. So they've just got to leave.

Diana Buttu 15:40

There's something very sick about the smug look of Netanyahu; he's a war criminal who is wanted now by the ICC, and yet he's still able to travel to the United States, which presumably means he'll also be able to travel to other foreign capitals as well. So there's something very sick about this.

And I don't know if you saw this, but there were reports today in the Israeli press that Netanyahu brought Trump a gift and the gift that he brought him was a gold-plated pager. Gold plated because Trump loves the color gold and the pager as a symbol of Israel's strength, its prowess, and its military capability. And there's a sick component to this.

Yumna Patel 16:30

We just have to kind of sit with this. The pager is a call back to the attack that Israel carried out with the exploding pagers in Lebanon that killed dozens of people and injured so many more, including children.

Diana Buttu 16:47

Including children. There were doctors that were on call. There are 30 people who've been made blind by this. Like it's a sick symbol. And here he is, this cat coming in, Netanyahu, and giving him a pager as kind of a symbol of; here's the gold, because we know you like gold and the pager, because we like the pager. And so there's something very sick about the whole thing. And it's gross. And that's what the plan is. It's sick and gross.

Yumna Patel 17:27

To this point of, clearly Netanyahu is smitten with whatever has been agreed to, whatever has been promised to him. Which we got inklings of in these statements yesterday. It still isn't completely clear, but something that isn't getting a lot of coverage that Trump said in the press conference with Netanyahu was actually about the West Bank, and it was about annexation.

In response to a reporter's question about potential Israeli annexation of the occupied West Bank, Trump said that he would be making a decision on the issue soon. He said, "People like the idea, but we haven't taken a position on it yet. We'll be making an announcement, probably on that very specific topic, over the next four weeks."

What do you make of those comments? Because there was a lot of speculation that West Bank annexation might be offered up as this sort of gift, maybe an exchange for Israel agreeing to continue phase two of ceasefire negotiations, although that seems to also be hanging in the balance. So I'm curious what your reaction is to the annexation comments. And do you see West Bank annexation

and Gaza, and the ceasefire as being connected?

Diana Buttu 18:38

Yes, they're definitely connected. So when the ceasefire agreement was signed, it was clear that yes, this was signed because Trump pushed it, which means that Biden could have pushed it. But it was also clear that it was not without reward for Netanyahu. And that became very apparent the night that Netanyahu appeared on Israeli television and said, We will be getting some very big assets in exchange. And so what does that mean? West Bank annexation, probably. But I think that's the least of it, by the way.

I've long advocated and believed that the West Bank has already been annexed. The only thing that remains is just very small things. One is the existence of the Palestinian Authority. And two, is that they haven't yet passed the laws fully expelling Palestinians. That's all that really hasn't been done. But everything else is already annexed. There isn't a separate law in the West Bank settlements than in Israel. It's one seamless place. You don't see a sign that says, Welcome to Occupied Territory. It's already been annexed.

I think that the things that the Israelis are going after are a little bit deeper. And I think that they're looking for the complete destruction of not only UNRWA, but of the camps, which is why I think they're going after the camps right now. I think that they are going to put into effect a policy of ethnically cleansing the camps and saying, if you want to be considered a refugee, it's not going to be within the borders that Israel controls.

And I think that when we're hearing these calls that are being made to King Abdullah, that's what I think they're talking about. And I do think that Trump is going to decide that; what do we need to have any of this stuff for? It's just one one big place. And when he says people like it, there's only one people, there's only one group of people that he's referring to. He's not talking to Palestinians. He's not

talking to humanity. He's talking to right-wing Israelis. And yeah, they like the idea.

Yumna Patel 21:04

I want to move a bit now to the situation in Gaza currently with the ceasefire, but before we do that, there's one thing I wanted to ask you. In response to this press conference, you posted a thread on X, and in one of the things you wrote, you said, we must think about what Israel and the US will do to carry out their ethnic cleansing program. 15 months of genocide may just be the beginning.

That statement is so chilling, especially as with all the hope that surrounded a ceasefire that maybe it would mark the ending of something, but not the beginning of something. Can you tell us more about what you mean by that statement?

Diana Buttu 21:48

So although the bombs have stopped, and I wrote about this, by the way, for Zeteo, but although the bombs have stopped, the genocide is not over because genocide isn't just about bombs dropping. It's not just about the number of people you kill, it's about whether you've killed off their ability to sustain life, to have life. And with the destruction of the healthcare system, with the destruction of the education system, with the destruction of the water system, all of these things that they've done, I think we are going to see a huge jump in the number of people who've been killed.

And not only the number of people who've been killed, but also the number of people who won't be able to have children, the number of people who are going to leave because they need to leave to be able to get medical treatment or even to have a normal life. And so I think that their plan is the idea of genocide, we were also focused on ceasefire, ceasefire, ceasefire, ceasefire, because we needed to have the bombs drop, but Israel did so much damage that these numbers are

going to go up.

And already just in the past week, we saw that the Ministry of Health came out and said there's no way we're going to be able to rescue anyone. So the death toll is now 62,000. That's direct deaths. We're not even talking about the indirect deaths. Deaths from starvation, deaths from disease, deaths from inability to get medicines, etc.

So my fear is that if we don't go along with their quote-unquote plan, then they're not going to allow stuff to get into Gaza. They've already cut off UNRWA. And if they don't allow that lifeline to get in and they're not gonna allow journalists in either, all of this is going to be done in the slow cover of darkness. That's the part that I'm afraid of. And I think that that's very realistic, unfortunately.

Yumna Patel 23:50

It's a chilling and devastating picture that you're painting, but it's important, because like you said, so many people, rightfully and naturally so, focused on calling for a ceasefire to happen. Because, like you said, the bombs needed to stop, but it does not mean that this is over. And we're seeing that in Gaza, we're certainly seeing it in the West Bank with everything that's been happening there as well.

But with that, you kind of bring us to this current moment in Gaza, where three weeks into the ceasefire, a lot has happened. But could you give us a kind of a brief recap of what the most significant things that have happened and according to the terms that were agreed upon last month, what still needs to happen for phase two and phase three of this ceasefire?

Diana Buttu 24:43

I'll first begin with what needs to happen because it's very important in the ceasefire agreement. So I have my reservations about a ceasefire agreement,

maybe that's a different conversation, but in the actual agreement itself, it calls for the release of more than a thousand Palestinians who are from Gaza, who the Israelis are holding without us knowing even their condition. These are the ones that are being held in the torture camps and in secret prisons. We have no idea how they're being held. And Israel hasn't released those people. So this includes doctors like Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya. So there are a lot of things that were supposed to happen that have not happened. And that's a major one.

The second is that we haven't seen that quote-unquote surge of humanitarian aid come in. And we haven't seen any monitoring either. And then when it comes to people who've been released, they're still undergoing a lot of interrogation and questioning. All of the people I know are still required to present themselves before the Israeli authorities for interrogation and questioning. I'm not sure if they got their papers saying that they've been released, which means that they're always stuck in this legal limbo. But also, the Israelis have not released the number of people that they should have been releasing. It's just not happening.

And so those are all the things that they haven't done. What am I hearing from people in Gaza? I don't know where to begin, Yumna. It's everything from friends who message me and say; My friend, my relative was last seen in X, Y, and Z area, can you try and find out if they're being held in one of the prison camps? To other people posting on social media, saying; I know that my relative was killed. If you were the person who buried him, can you please just let me know where he's buried? To other people saying, if you've seen such and such and such a person, we don't know if they're dead or alive, please let us know.

So people are going back to the North and literally going back to just rubble and to toxic and even Trump acknowledged it, the 30,000 tons of explosives, the unexploded ordnances. They're going back to really apocalyptic conditions, and there's still no vision as to how it is that people are going to survive. And that's the part that's so tragic, it's not even tragic, it's immoral, it's illegal, it's unethical, that

we still need to negotiate our own existence.

Yumna Patel 27:33

We've seen these sort of testimonies that you're describing, it's certainly what we've seen as well, and the reporting from our Gaza correspondent, as well as just writers from Gaza who write for us, just talking about, after the initial euphoria and just excitement of a ceasefire being announced, just this shock that is setting in at the level of devastation and the reality that's setting in for so many people.

And I want to ask you, it's hard to pinpoint where to begin when it comes to the most kind of pressing issues facing Palestinians in Gaza right now, because on one hand, on the individual level, people are still trying to find their loved ones that are missing if they're even alive or not and bury them. But beyond that, you have these much bigger questions around reconstruction. Around the healthcare system in Gaza, around food, survival, where do these things stand right now? How do these factor into this? And I do want to follow up, maybe after this, and ask you about. You mentioned that you had your reservations and concerns about the ceasefire agreement, so I do want to know what you think about that as well.

Diana Buttu 28:57

The whole thing is immoral. That's the problem is that we were forced to be in a place where we're negotiating for our own survival, and if that's not perverse, I don't know what is. And so you're asking what is the most pressing, all of it is, every aspect of it, because people need food, they need water, they need shelter. But life isn't just about food, water and shelter, it's about being able to the people you see and the people who you're around and the places you go and in your education.

The Israelis have reduced life in Gaza, even before October, down to the basics of whether you have food, shelter, water, and in the food, it's all about like just

consuming. That's it. And they never viewed Gaza as being a place other than these are animals that are in a cage, equivalent, and we just need to feed them in order to keep them alive so that we can say that we kept them alive and gaslight them as well.

The problem is that the world has accepted this. It's so dehumanizing that even the ways in which people are thinking is in this dehumanizing way of just making sure they have enough food, just making sure they have enough water, just making sure they have enough shelter. And all of that is necessary at the same time. But people are not thinking at beyond. Thinking bigger.

And the part that really bothers me of that is why is it that Israel, the state that committed genocide, why did they get to decide anything? And that's the part that's bothering me now, is I'm not sure there's going to be a phase two. I think we're just going to be at a standstill for a long time. And they're going to lord over the idea of humanitarian aid, like dangle it, with the alternative being, if you don't agree, well, the alternative is what Trump has laid out. That's my fear.

Yumna Patel 30:58

The question that's on my mind that I think, is on everyone's mind. Beyond phase two, phase three of the ceasefire, what happens now, which you've kind of laid out, what you think is going to happen when it comes to that. But this question around what you mentioned of the bigger picture, the future, where do we go from here? How can you begin to imagine a future for Palestinians in Gaza, given the state of Gaza right now and the fact that everyone who is making decisions about the future of Gaza is not from Gaza, is not Palestinian. So, where does that leave us?

Diana Buttu 31:47

Exactly. We've seen a complete and utter failure of international leadership on all levels. And it's a failure that, if you can't come up with a plan to address a state

that's committed genocide against a refugee population, then this international system does not work, and that's become perfectly clear.

And then when you look inside Israeli society and you see the number of Israelis who are actually supporting what Trump is saying, it's very high. And it's high because they've never had to acknowledge or account or be held to account for their war crimes and for the Nakba and for any of the things that they've done.

We're in a very sick place. We're in a very sick place. But even though we're in a very sick place, I don't think that it's packaged in this nice bow that the Israelis think it is. If these 15 months have taught us anything, it's that Palestinians can disrupt, and they did disrupt, and will continue to disrupt not only Israel but this international system and highlight it for how useless it is.

So, I don't have the answer in terms of the short term. I don't. I do think, though, that with all of these plans that they're talking about of ethnic cleansing, there is starting to be a mind shift. That we can't just keep kicking the can down the road to the next person. That doesn't mean to say it won't happen, but I do think that there's starting to be a shift in thinking in ways that there hadn't been before.

Yumna Patel 33:35

I want to leave listeners with not necessarily an action item, but let's just say I can imagine that a lot of people after listening to this and just looking at the news unfolding, what's happening in Gaza, all these orders and statements from Trump, what's happening in the West Bank, questions about annexation. What about the movement here in the US? There are so many things kind of swirling around at once.

From your view, as people try to make sense of what is happening, what would you tell people to pay attention to or to look out for or to watch when it comes to the news and when it comes to really trying to get a good understanding of the

moment that we're in and what this moment means for Palestine and Palestinians.

Diana Buttu 34:25

I leave with a couple of things. One is, keep your eyes on making sure that our activism is continuing because that's exactly what the Zionists want, is they want us to be fatigued and to get exhausted and want politics of fear and desperation always. They want us to be afraid of them and they want us to feel like it's hopeless. For me, it's not, I'm neither afraid nor do I think it's hopeless. And I think it is very important for people to keep pushing on both of those levels.

But the things I think to watch out for are the plans that are being cooked up, because they are. Are they plans that are being decided by Palestinians or for Palestinians? Is there Palestinian decision-making and agency? Or is it out of this sense of it's a humanitarian problem? And so those are things for me that I think for people who aren't paying attention to the day-to-day, those are the things that I think are the important ones, which is to be looking at who's doing the decision making and on what.

And the bigger picture of, is Israel being held to account? Because I just refuse to accept that in this day and age, a society, a country, is allowed to commit genocide and get away with it. And that a society is allowed to promote genocide, and the people in that society are allowed to get away with it. It's mind-boggling. And yet, we do see this.

I'm sure you saw this the other day. One of the Trump appointees to the Holocaust Memorial Committee, I think it's called, is somebody who wrote an entire op-ed talking about the references that Nazis used when it came to people who were Jewish. No mercy, no innocence to collective guilt.

And so we have to be aware of what Zionism is about and what it is that their plans are. And that's why I think looking through and saying, who's doing the plan

drawing and for what benefit, is the stuff that we have to be paying attention to. Plus, watch out for the number of prisoners, because the Israelis are very quickly rounding people up and throwing them into Israeli jails, into Israeli torture camps. And as you know, the vast majority are without charge, without trial.

Yumna Patel 36:51

Well, Diana, thank you so much for joining us and for talking about these really important issues. And I just really want to hold up what you said, it's important not to be fearful and hopeless, because that is the goal of everything that's happening. Thank you for that, and thank you for joining us.

Diana Buttu 37:12

Thanks again. It's my pleasure.

Yara Hawari 37:17

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