ROUNDTABLE | POLITICS

Trump's "Deal" for Palestinians: Repercussions and Responses

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Overview

US President Donald Trump's "Deal of the Century" stipulates that Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state with all of Jerusalem as its capital, give up the right of return, accept the annexation of the Jordan Valley and the illegal settlements, and live in Bantustans. Though the deal largely does not change conditions on the ground for Palestinians, it helps legitimize the Israeli colonial project and emboldens Israel to pursue, at an ever accelerating pace, the seizure of more Palestinian land and the displacement of more Palestinian people – what Al-Shabaka Senior Palestine Policy Fellow Yara Hawari has argued is meant to lead to "total Palestinian capitulation." Even as the world now faces the COVID-19 pandemic, these Israeli moves continue apace.[1]

Al-Shabaka asked members of its network to discuss the ramifications of the deal where they live and to outline what steps are being taken – or should be taken – to counter them, with a particular focus on connections among Palestinians across the globe.

Munir Nuseibah, **Omar Shaban,** and **Inès Abdel Razek** analyze Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank, respectively, recounting Palestinian reactions to the deal (or lack thereof) and calling for a renewed and reinvigorated Palestinian leadership to take on the current challenges. Shaban also examines how the

Palestinian Authority and Hamas have squandered the moment, which, he argues, if handled differently could have brought about a unified Palestinian front.

Jaber Suleiman and **Oraib Rantawi** investigate the deal's repercussions for refugees and refugee rights. While Suleiman, who considers Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, ultimately highlights some global collaborative efforts among Palestinian refugee communities to stand up to the deal, Rantawi, who assesses Jordan, laments the dearth of these connections and urges their strengthening. **Randa Wahbe,** writing about the Palestinian diaspora in the US, calls on Palestinian-Americans to rise up and capitalize on their strength to revitalize the demand for the right of return and freedom. She outlines steps needed to accomplish this, including demanding a voice among Palestinian society writ large, emphasizing the connections discussed by Suleiman and Rantawi.

Jerusalem

Munir Nuseibah

Since UN General Assembly Resolution 181 in 1947, which recommended partitioning Palestine into two states and keeping Jerusalem as a separate entity administered by the United Nations, the city has faced harsh Zionist colonial policies. These have included mass displacement and dispossession, restrictions on movement, and segregation of the urban space. As defined by the occupying power, Palestinians in Jerusalem have the unique civil status of "permanent residents" in Israel, a status that Israel has widely revoked and restricted.

Donald Trump's "deal" adds to the fears of Jerusalem's Palestinians about the future. Israel, of course, did not wait for Trump's intervention, and annexed West and East Jerusalem and a number of other surrounding neighborhoods after the 1948 and 1967 wars, respectively. What the Trump deal provides is an opportunity

for Israel to argue that this annexation was legitimate, as it is now recognized by the world's largest superpower. Such a position provides Israel with further cover to seize Palestinian land and dispossess Palestinians in order to create a demographic Jewish majority in the city.

The proposed plan further separates Jerusalem from its Palestinian surroundings, making it an exclusively Israeli metropolis. Though the fate of the Palestinian communities living within the city and carrying Israeli residence permits is uncertain, it is likely that Israel will severely curtail their ability to move from one side of the wall to the other. Israel has also been increasing illegal settlement construction and development in and around Jerusalem, which has the intentional effect of further restricting Palestinian natural growth. Palestinians are also apprehensive about Jerusalem's holy sites, most notably the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which is facing continuous Israeli restrictions and attempts to change its status from an Islamic site to a Jewish one.

Moreover, Palestinians in Jerusalem are fearful about the overall effect of the deal, as it encourages Israel to continue to prevent refugees and displaced persons from return and further divides Palestine into smaller and smaller Bantustans while advancing and developing exclusively Jewish colonies in the whole of Palestine.

Concurrently, Palestinian Jerusalemites are experiencing a leadership crisis. While the initial reaction from Palestinian officialdom – a categorial rejection of the Trump plan – was a good start, it is not enough. Indeed, years of Israeli political repression have succeeded in limiting active official representation and there is almost no clear actor that has the agency and power to lead the population. This has kept Jerusalemites holding their breath, unsure how Israel will translate its increased impunity into further facts on the ground.

The Palestinian leadership and Palestinian civil society must rethink their whole strategy and what liberation means. Israel is continuing the classic colonial tactic

of proposing agreements with indigenous inhabitants in order to buy more time to steal more land and draw new boundaries. The time has come to rethink the goals of Palestinian liberation in a way that focuses on ending the colonial regime rather than partitioning the land.

Gaza Strip

Omar Shaban

Many residents of the Gaza Strip have expressed their rejection of the Trump administration's "deal" despite their belief that it would have a lesser impact on Gaza than the West Bank and Jerusalem. Indeed, Palestinians in the enclave have led popular mobilization efforts rejecting the deal, with numerous mass demonstrations that brought together protestors from all walks of life confirming their condemnation of the plan.

Palestinian political officials have also rejected the deal unequivocally, including President Mahmoud Abbas, Hamas, and all political and armed groups in Gaza. Such rebuffs have remained limited to press statements and political speeches. The Palestinian Authority (PA) also addressed several international Arab and Islamic actors to affirm the Palestinian rejection of the deal.

Some actors, such as former chief of Hamas's Political Bureau Khaled Meshaal, have called on the PA to take bolder steps, including withdrawal from the Oslo Accords, dissolution of the PA, and enforcement of the numerous decisions taken by the PLO's Executive Committee and the National Council to sever ties with and end obligations toward Israel, especially in regard to security coordination. Even before the deal was unveiled, others denounced the positions of some Arab regimes and politicians who called on the Palestinians to wait and think the plan through before rejecting it.

On the other hand, some from Gaza have declared on social media that the deal could provide better solutions for the Gaza Strip in lieu of the now 14-year painful reality of blockade, poverty, unemployment, multiple wars, and hopelessness. The hardship brought by the siege and the ramifications of the division between the PA and Hamas have pushed people to consider such an unjust deal potentially less harsh than their bleak reality.

Further, despite a shared rejection of the plan, both PA and Hamas officials accused the other of being subtly complicit in "passing" the deal or failing to take serious steps to thwart it. These actions marred the chance for Palestinian consensus. The Palestinian public had previously been somewhat optimistic regarding the consensus of otherwise divided Palestinian parties when they all rejected the deal and boycotted the Bahrain economic conference in June 2019. Nevertheless, this rejection did not translate into practical steps for unification.

The Palestinian division emboldened the US, which assumed that the political regime's fragmentation had weakened the support of Arab and Islamic actors. Despite recognizing the division's catastrophic effects, the PA and Hamas have failed to take serious steps to resolve it. Although Abbas stated that he will send a PLO delegation to the Gaza Strip for unity talks, the statement was made in January and has yet to materialize.

The Trump deal necessitates the development of a Palestinian strategy that ensures an inclusive and effective unified national position and a plan of action that is neither weak nor extreme. In fact, the prejudiced deal could have been a blessing in disguise had the Palestinians treated it as motivation to achieve internal reconciliation. Instead, the drivers of the division are stronger than the drivers of the rejection. This is another chance that the entire Palestinian political regime is squandering.

West Bank

Inès Abdel Razek

For Palestinians in the West Bank, the "deal" put forward by the US administration is a non-starter. Rather, it came as no surprise and shed further light on a one-state apartheid reality under which Palestinians have long lived, greenlighting a *de jure* annexation that is already *de facto* in place. For decades, great powers have treated Palestinians with similar contempt, making decisions despite them or without them at the table. This plan is another humiliation in which Palestinians are told what is good for them instead of having their fundamental rights recognized.

If anything, the Trump deal has increased Palestinians' mistrust of Western interlocutors and partners, including European countries that have welcomed the plan as a genuine effort and have failed once again to hold Israel accountable for its human rights violations. These reactions have further convinced Palestinians that they can only count on themselves and need their own plan. However, at present, the vast majority of them do not trust Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) or Palestinian Authority (PA) leaders to come up with a strategy that will defend their rights and change the current reality.

This mistrust is particularly acute among people in the West Bank who are living in PA-administered areas. Most people's lives are dictated by the hardship of the occupation, which has already transformed communities into fragmented Bantustans. Farmers, workers in settlements, shop owners, and PA employees provide as best they can for their families, overcoming obstacles, whether roadblocks, a lack of water, or a limited cashflow, in circumstances they know are controlled by Israel and accepted by the PA. This relentless daily existence is likely the reason why no visible outburst occurred from the Palestinian population in the West Bank after the Trump administration announced the deal.

Rather, it is settlers and the Israeli authorities who have exhibited more of a direct

response. A spike in home demolitions; authorizations for new settlement construction, such as the reopening of projects in the E1 corridor and E2; and land grabs and outposts such as at Jabal Al-Arma/Beita south of Nablus have occurred since the US first announced the deal. Popular resistance committees have continued to defy these actions, experiencing daily attacks from the army and settlers.

The Trump plan brings to an end the "two-state solution," a hollow mantra that the US and Israel never truly pursued. While there is no consensus among Palestinians regarding whether they want to live in two states, one state, a federal state, or otherwise, all Palestinians want freedom, dignity, and justice, regardless of the administrative arrangement. Palestinian identity and the right to self-determination cannot be detached from Palestinians' attachment to their homeland – the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea – particularly its environment, heritage, history, and culture. This is what the Trump plan ignores, instead aiming to redefine freedom as the act of receiving "economic incentives," no matter how racist and unequal the system is in which those incentives are offered.

Lebanon

Jaber Suleiman

The Trump plan's chapter on Palestinian refugees reveals its goal to impose solutions on the refugee issue that disregard international law and relevant UN resolutions, principally UNGA 194, through calling for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement that "provide[s] for a complete end and release of any and all claims relating to refugee or immigration status."

To achieve this goal, Trump's vision rejects UNRWA's multigenerational definition of "Palestine refugee;" terminates UNRWA's mandate; dismantles refugee camps

across the region; liquidates the right of return; denies a proper and just reparation for Palestinian refugees; and aims at permanently resettling said refugees in the Arab countries where they reside. The vision describes this solution, ironically, as "just, fair and realistic."

The plan focuses specifically on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, highlighting their socioeconomic and spatial marginalization and their ambiguous legal status that deprives them of almost all basic human rights. The vision justifies its claims for integrating Palestinian refugees into the Lebanese host community as a durable solution that can end their suffering.

This issue of integration, or *tawteen*, in the plan has increased Lebanese fears of the Palestinian presence, and the Lebanese state has in turn initiated more discriminatory policies toward refugees. The Ministry of Labor's July 2019 plan, for instance, imposed even more severe restrictions on the labor of Palestinians, who are considered foreigners in the legislation. The decision sparked widespread and unprecedented protest among the Palestinian refugee community, which rejected the plan and refuted any link between basic human rights and resettlement and declared its adherence to the right of return. In fact, rejection of *tawteen* has been a Lebanese-Palestinian constant.

Instead of imposing further restrictions, Lebanon should modify its policies toward Palestinian refugees to further comply with international law by granting them a broad spectrum of basic human rights without naturalizing them. This would be the most effective approach, as it would provide Lebanon's Palestinians with temporary protection and would mitigate their everyday suffering while allowing them to struggle for their return – and as such could also calm Lebanese fears of permanent resettlement.

The Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon, through its civil society organizations, has always been in constant coordination with its counterparts in

Palestine and the diaspora with respect to the threats targeting Palestinian refugees. For example, Lebanon's Center for Refugee Rights – Aidoun, in coordination with the Palestinian Center for Citizenship and Refugee Rights – Badil, based in Bethlehem, organizes an annual course in Beirut on Palestinian refugee status in international law that is attended by Palestinian and Lebanese human rights activists. The 2019 session focused on the implications of the Trump deal and its vision regarding refugees.

These centers and other Palestinian NGOs have also raised these issues in regional and international events in the past year, including the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD)'s workshop on Palestinian refugees, held in Amman in October 2019; the Bruno Kreisky Forum on Palestinian refugees and diaspora communities, held in Vienna in the same month; and an Academic Friends of UNRWA workshop, organized by Exeter University in February 2020. Such events demonstrate the extensive efforts of the refugee communities in Palestine and the diaspora in advocating for refugee rights, and constitute a tool to confront Trump's vision.

Jordan

Oraib Rantawi

Every provision and term of Trump's "deal" directly affects the 4.4 million Palestinians of all legal statuses in Jordan who make up nearly one third of Palestinians worldwide and about two thirds of the country's population. The deal, for instance, deprives the more than one million displaced Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip residing in Jordan of their right to return to their towns and villages and makes their movement between Jordan and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) even more contingent on Israeli approval, since the deal recognizes Israel's security control over borders and international crossings.

Such constraints would intensify should Israel act on its promise to officially annex the Jordan Valley and the northern Dead Sea. Displaced Palestinians in the OPT are therefore in jeopardy of losing not only their right of return but also their right to visit relatives.

Jordan, however, is unlikely to grant Palestinians from the OPT nationality, citizenship rights, or even civil rights because of the country's mandate to maintain its "demographic balance" and avoid indicating any willingness to accept resettlement and alternative homeland schemes. Despite this situation, owing to a deadlocked Palestinian national liberation project and the imperatives of daily existence, the past decade has seen Jordanians of Palestinian origin begin to identify more as Jordanian.

Israel is having a moment of strategic supremacy and believes that the time has come for a decisive end to its century-long colonial project by proclaiming victory. The "Deal of the Century" is that proclamation. Meanwhile, what remains of the Palestinian national movement is on the brink of collapse, if it has not already collapsed. It is reeling from division, sluggishness, corruption, and a disconnect from its people. Countering the Trump deal therefore requires a new Palestinian strategy that redefines the Palestinian national project and rejuvenates the Palestinian national movement.

A major challenge to this need is the fact that interaction between Palestinian communities has been almost nonexistent for years. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which united those communities, has evolved into a helpless and symbolic body. Moreover, the announcement of the Trump deal coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, rendering synergies and communication among Palestinian communities even more difficult and rare. Only Hamas has been able to sustain communication channels thanks to its regional allies, Qatar and Turkey, and the far reach of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Palestinian diaspora conference in Turkey is the only open channel of communication for the different Palestinian

communities, including that in Jordan. Such connections must be strengthened to confront the challenges of the current moment.

The United States

Randa Wahbe

Trump's "deal" affirmed the United States' unwavering support for Israel to liquidate all Palestinian rights to their land and sovereignty. Global political leaders have always grotesquely contested Palestinian humanity by imploring Palestinians to give up the basic tenets of their cause. Even so, Trump has ushered in a new trend in which Palestinian disenfranchisement is brought to the forefront in an unwaveringly loud and unflinching way. Watching Trump smugly announce the annexation of the Jordan Valley, land swaps, and Jerusalem as Israel's capital overwhelmed Palestinians with a sense of defeat.

But rather than wallow in despair, this moment calls on Palestinians, particularly Palestinian-Americans, to evoke the ever-timely statement by Audre Lorde: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Trump's announcement has made it crystal clear that Palestinians can no longer seek their rights and dignity within the established frameworks of international law and third-party state obligations. While Palestinians must absolutely use these tools to their advantage, they can never be a barometer of what they deserve.

Palestinians deserve more than the scraps at the bottom of the barrel of human rights discourses or international treaties that maintain a world order that refuses to decolonize. This is a golden opportunity for the Palestinian community in the United States to rise up together, become a collective community, and capitalize on its strength to revitalize the demands for the right of return and freedom. Palestinian-Americans must destabilize the normalcy of violence against their families back home. To do so, two crucial steps must occur.

First, the Palestinian diaspora in the United States must organize under a progressive agenda. It cannot see its dispossession in Palestine as separate from the oppression of Black, indigenous, queer, and undocumented communities in the United States, nor can it distance itself from the structures that continue to dominate and expel people there. As taxpayers and members of communities in the US, Palestinian-Americans cannot isolate themselves from their daily lived experiences and must work against the violence perpetrated by white supremacy.

Yet fighting for a progressive agenda in the United States does not mean giving up a Palestinian identity. The second step forward is demanding a voice within Palestinian society for Palestinians living in exile and in the diaspora. Palestinian-Americans are often made to feel that their distance and inability to live on Palestinian land excludes them from shaping visions for a liberated Palestinian future. Palestinians are a globally fragmented nation and they must build a platform that gives them a voice and representation considering their dispersed condition.

The self-anointed Palestinian Authority cannot continue to disenfranchise Palestinians in the diaspora and elide their demands because they are far away, while continuing to negotiate away the Palestinian nation's rights. Palestinian-Americans are an integral part of Palestinian history and the Palestinian future, and now, more than ever, they must assert themselves as so.

1. To read this piece in French, please click here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.

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