

ISSUE BRIEF

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# MIDDLE EAST PEACE PLAN: EMERGING POLITICAL DYNAMICS AND IMPLICATIONS

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*by*

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## Abstract

This issue brief tries to employ different lenses in order to understand the evolving US-Israel-Palestine relations in the light of the recently formulated Middle East Peace Plan steered by the US Diplomat Jared Kushner. The highlight of this plan has been the legitimisation of annexing 30% land in the West Bank by Israel.

## Introduction

The gravity of the Middle East Peace Plan is indicated by the fact that in the midst of a Pandemic, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reached Israel to deliberate upon the future of this plan. This comes at a time when Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faces intense domestic backlash due to a corruption scandal. **The discourse in Israel had conveniently changed from “whether to annex” to “how much to annex”.** Many international organisations including the UN, Arab League, etc have called it ‘illegal’ and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet has termed it as a ‘combustible mix’ which would immediately unleash violence and end all the prospects of negotiations.<sup>1</sup>

## Israel–Palestine Conflict

*“People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them”*

The current conundrum of Israel and Palestine begins with the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War. Palestine was a part of the erstwhile Ottoman Empire, and upon its dismemberment, a treaty named *Sykes-Picot Agreement* was signed between the **European Powers in 1916** to divide the Ottoman Arab Territories between the ‘spheres of influence.’<sup>2</sup> The Palestinian territories came under the British control. However, five years before signing of this treaty, the British government had promised the Zionist organisations, who were demanding a Jewish State in Palestine owing to the historical proposition that historically their ancestors had lived there, after they got scattered. To convince the Arab leaders, led by Sherif Husain, there were many correspondences by the British counterparts, of which the *Balfour*

*Declaration* holds primary importance. This Declaration assigned a state for Jews in Palestine, while maintaining the rights of non-Jews. The premise of Zionists demanding a separate Jewish State stems from the anti-Semitic ideas and growing atrocities on Jews gaining prominence in the Eastern Europe since the 1800s.<sup>3</sup> The issue becomes more complex when one takes into account the religious texts and the ‘scattering of the Jewish ancestry’ as evident in Theodore Herzl’s late 19th-century political Zionist project which aimed to colonise Palestine and create an exclusive Jewish state. The process of Jewish arrival in Palestine was also a result of Historical processes as highlighted in *Protestant Ethics* by Max Weber. At last, the Jewish population, which owned only 7 per cent of Palestinian land was given as much as 56 per cent of the most fertile parts of Palestine.<sup>4</sup> Thus, began this long-drawn conflict for land, identity and nation.

## Intifada

*“A land without people for a people without a land”*

With this clarion call, originally the possession of Zionists, began the movement for Palestinian People. ‘Intifadah’ in Arabic literally means shaking off.<sup>5</sup> These were a two-round series of violent protests rooted in emancipation of Palestinians.

## First Intifada

The international context of this was the 38th session of the UNGA where guidelines to ensure peace in the Middle East were curated. The various reports of International organisations like Red Cross, Committee in Inalienable Rights of Palestinians pointed to Israeli oppression, fuelling discontent among Palestinians.<sup>6</sup> The western media comprehensively covered their

1. “Bachelet Urges Israel to halt West Bank Annexation Plans, Warning “Shockwaves will Last for Decades.”” <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/News-Events/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26009&LangID=E>.

2. *The Origins and Evolution of the Palestine Problem Part I: 1917-1947 - Study* (30 June 1978). n.d. UNISPAL-United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine. <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/5ba47a5c6cef541b802563e000493b8c/aeac80e740c782e4852561150071fdb0?OpenDocument>.

3. Makdisi, Karim. 2020. 2018. “Palestine and the Arab Israeli Conflict: 100 Years of Regional Relevance and International Failure.” *Menara* 27:25. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137530820>.

4. *ibid.*

5. “Intifada - History, meaning, cause, & significance.” n.d. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/intifadah>.

6. “*The Origins and Evolution of the Palestine Problem Part II: 1947-1977 – Study*. 1979. UNISPAL-United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine. <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/5ba47a5c6cef541b802563e000493b8c/d442111e70e417e3802564740045a309?OpenDocument>.

exploitation.<sup>7</sup> Things got more convoluted with the annexation of Lebanon as it sought to explore its identity in the intensely divided Arab-Israeli region. The invasion of Lebanon began in 1978, but the trigger point was the attack on the Israeli Ambassador in Lebanon. As a result of this, a ‘security zone’ was created in South Lebanon.<sup>8</sup> The climax to all these developments was the victory of the Far-right Likud Party in 1977<sup>9</sup> which began construction in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The **immediate precursors**<sup>10</sup> to these series of uprisings were stabbing of an Israeli citizen and a truck accident followed by an accident of a bus carrying Palestinian workers under mysterious circumstances, leading to first Intifada. The proportion of the Israeli casualties to the Palestinians was estimated as 1:3.<sup>11</sup> Thereafter the Oslo Accords were signed, wherein the Palestine Liberation Organisation accepted Israel’s right to exist and five-year time was given to both to forge a two-state solution.

## Second Intifada

The advent of Hamas had changed the regional landscape.<sup>12</sup> This along with the failure of the Oslo Accords and the Camp David Summit unleashed another Intifada, this time more violent than the earlier. Meanwhile, Israel continued to build its settlements and on the other hand the Palestinian Prime Minister Yasser Arafat was pressing for negotiations on their terms in the Camp David Summits held in 2000. The Likud Party was in power once again and the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s<sup>13</sup> visit to the mounts of

the Al-Aqsa mosque this time became an immediate trigger point. The proportion of casualties was little more than 1:3 this time.<sup>14</sup> Although the violence ended in 2005, the nature of the conflict has been seemingly modified with Hamas gaining electoral victory in 2006-2007.

## Recent Trends in Conflict

After years of conflict, the trend has moved from a two-state solution to a one state solution, with equal rights for both Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to the UN Security Council proposition in 2016, which stated that forced Israeli settlements in regions inhabited by Palestinians are illegal and be stopped immediately, the settlements have only been increasing.<sup>16</sup> Palestinians still demand a separate state, but after all these years, they too realise it might not be a viable solution.

The Oslo Accords, which offered Israel to return some Palestinian land in return for an end to Palestinian resistance, gave hopes for improved relations with the neighbouring Arab countries. However, Israel never left its settlements and is making the future prospect of Palestinians’ return an increasingly grim possibility. This has shown how even under the Oslo Accords, Israel’s territorial claims increased.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, Hamas—a Palestinian military group—exerts local authority in the Gaza Strip, home to 2 million Palestinians. Even though Israel only recently proposed plans of annexation of the West Bank, it has

7. Bar-Siman-Tov, S. 2007. *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: From Conflict Resolution to Conflict Management*. New York: Macmillan.

8. Lebanon Profile-Timeline.” 2018. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14649284>.

9. Beauchamp, Z. 2018. “What were the Intifadas?” Vox, May 14. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.vox.com/platform/amp/2018/11/20/18080066/israel-palestine-intifadas-first-second>.

10. “Intifada begins on Gaza Strip.” 2010. History. [https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.history.com/\\_amp/this-day-in-history/intifada-begins-on-gaza-strip](https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.history.com/_amp/this-day-in-history/intifada-begins-on-gaza-strip).

11. Ibid.

12. Robinson, G. E. 2010. “Al-Aqsa Intifada 10 Years Later.” *Foreign Policy*, October 18. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/10/18/al-aqsa-intifada-10-years-later/>.

13. “The Launch of a Political Career.” n.d. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ariel-Sharon/The-launch-of-a-political-career>.

14. Robinson, G. E. (2010, October 18). Al-aqsa intifada 10 years later. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/10/18/al-aqsa-intifada-10-years-later/>

15. “What Annexation would Really Mean for Middle East Peace.” 2020. *Foreign Affairs*, July 2. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-06-30/what-annexation-would-really-mean-middle-east-peace>.

16. “Arab Envoy Warns Israelis that Annexation Threatens Warming Ties.” 2020. *The New York Times*, June 12. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/world/middleeast/west-bank-annexation-israel-uae.html>.

17. “The Origins And Evolution of the Palestine Problem Part IV: 1984-1988 – Study. 1990. UNISPAL-United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine. <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/5ba47a5c6cef541b802563e000493b8c/40af4c8615bc9837802564740046f76?OpenDocument>.

been unofficially doing it for years, by encouraging Israeli settlements in the region and providing them protection from local Palestinians. Around 500,000 to 700,000 Jewish Israelis live in the West Bank. Previous developments, comprised of an unending conflict, a rise of extremist militias on both sides, and a generation of lives lost to oppression and deprivation of basic human rights<sup>18</sup> have shown that the two-state solution should be forgotten and rather, a single state with equal rights for both peoples should be embraced. Not only Palestinians will be given a dignified life but also Israelis will benefit from such a solution. They will get back their security, stability, growth and access to various historical and religious sites in the West Bank. Israel's denial of the basic rights of Palestinians is being termed as the '**middle eastern version of apartheid**,'<sup>19</sup> which cannot go on for long.

## US-led Peace Plan

The Israel and Palestine issue reached a new milestone when the US President Donald Trump announced his Peace Plan 2020 known as Peace to Prosperity. It talks about the territorial distribution between Israel and Palestine. According to the proposed plan, Israel will get an undisputed authority over the Jordan Valley, consisting of a vast expanse of the West Bank while Palestine will get the Gaza Strip. The West Bank is at the threshold of Jordan Valley, which is strategically important to Israel's defence.<sup>20</sup> According to the Peace Plan, Israeli sovereignty has to be applied in parts of the large swath of the West Bank along Jordan Valley which will lead to 4.5 per cent of the Palestinians living in the annexed territories under Israeli law.<sup>21</sup> If Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu only extends the plan till the settlements, it would only mean annexation of 3 per cent of the entire West Bank and will have to wait for the rest of 27 per cent until the boundaries are signed with Washington.

What would change on the ground is the time and speed with which the settlements in and around the West Bank will be built. Until now, the Israeli laws in the West Bank only applied to the 'settlers' and not to the Palestinians and therefore there will be hardly any change in the citizenry being covered under the Israeli laws. However, up till now any zoning or construction in the West Bank requires prior permission of Israel's defence minister and prime minister, and can take months or years. After this Peace Plan and the consequent annexation, it will become a local matter<sup>22</sup> and therefore much easier to carry out.

## Political Implications

The domestic political repercussions for the Likud Party and Netanyahu are reinstating his position as the Supreme leader capable of taking decisions crucial for Israel's security before he resigns for a term for Benny Gantz in 2021. As for the Palestinian politics, President Mahmoud Abbas is already facing a lot of setbacks to his popularity domestically. There were primarily two mobilisations in Palestine which took place against the imminent annexation—one in Jericho and the other in Ramallah. In Ramallah only a handful of people, around 200, participated in the protests. The Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre and German Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Centre conducted a poll in which 83 per cent of the Palestinians believed that holding an election was necessary.<sup>23</sup> The atrophy of the strength of the Palestinian Authority, the archaic leadership coupled with the failure of peace processes have penetrated into the masses as a deep sense of fatigue. This fatigue is slowly turning into despondency<sup>24</sup> because of which the leaders are not able to mobilise masses against the forthcoming annexation.

On the other hand, at an international level, Trump administration has withheld the US aid for Gaza

18. Bar-Siman-Tov, S. 2007. *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: From Conflict Resolution to Conflict Management*. New York: Macmillan.

19. *Ibid.*

20. "Explainer: Israel, Annexation and the West Bank." 2020. BBC News, June 16. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52756427>.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. "Palestinian Leaders Struggle to Mobilise Street against Annexation. 2020. *The Times of India*, June 29. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/palestinian-leaders-struggle-to-mobilise-street-against-annexation/articleshow/76682098.cms>.

24. *Ibid.*

and West Bank along with the Palestinian Security aid which includes a US\$ 200 million “Diplomatic Progress Aid” used for the diplomatic resolution of this long-drawn conflict.<sup>25</sup> The US is also repeatedly threatened by the Arab allies of cutting off all ties and at the same time, it has not also garnered much support with its European allies. The Arab allies that are fearful of a rising Iran, like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, etc, have been used to streamline Israeli-Arab interests, but recently there have been signals of discontentment observed among these states as well.

## Future of the Region and Stakeholders

Netanyahu was getting support from certain Arab countries, owing to the American strategy to create an Arabic Coalition against Iran,<sup>26</sup> while others like the UAE elicited strong responses. In all this, Donald Trump has been the first President to openly support the one state solution and by materialising the Abraham Accords (Israel-UAE deal and Israel-Bahrain deal), it has pacified Arab apprehensions and put the annexation on a “temporary halt.”<sup>27</sup> With this, all anticipations of increasing Arab–Israeli hostility have been shunned for the time being.

This needs to be viewed in the context of the US wanting to scale down its military presence in the region, while also maintaining a strong hold on Iran. Trump’s diplomatic tactics have been called ‘Jacksonian,’<sup>28</sup> which refers to an aggressively patriotic stand on diplomacy, and willing to use force as soon as any threat arises, often quoted as “More rubble less trouble.”<sup>29</sup> This was proven by the assassination of Qasem Soleimani during ongoing tensions with Iran.

25. Lynch, C., and R. Gramer. 2020. “Trump Pressures Palestinians and Allies over Peace Plan.” *Foreign Policy*, February 11. <https://foreign-policy.com/2020/02/11/trump-pressures-palestinians-over-middle-east-peace-plan-israel-netanyahu-abbas-olmert-united-nations-diplomacy/>.

26. “Pompeo says US Building Anti-Iran Coalition after Saudi Oil Attack.” 2019. *France 24*, September 20. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/amp.france24.com/en/20190920-usa-mike-pompeo-anti-iran-coalition-saudi-oil-attack-houthi-yemen>.

27. Kershner, Isabel, and Adam Rasgon. 2020. “For Palestinians, Israel-U.A.E. Deal Swaps One Nightmare for Another.” *The New York Times*, August 14. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/world/middleeast/palestinians-israel-uae-annexation-peace.html>.

28. Friedersdorf, C. 2020. *Is Trump a Jacksonian at heart?* *The Atlantic*, January 15. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/amp.theatlantic.com>.

29. Dozier, Kimberly, and John Walcott. 2020. “After Retaliation, Iran’s 40-Year Conflict with U.S. Likely to Return to the Shadows.” *Time*, January 8. <https://time.com/5761897/us-iran-conflict-continues/>.

30. Helou, A. 2019. “Trump’s ‘Arab NATO’ Withers on the Vine.” *Defense News*, February 15. <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/index/2019/02/15/trumps-arab-nato-withers-on-the-vine/>.

31. *Ibid.*

A **strategic shift from military force to use of diplomacy** is necessary in the region now, with a focus on establishing dialogue amongst the regional powers, with a motive of bringing an end to proxy wars in the region. The Middle East currently lacks authority as a single union, unlike the African Union. The Arab NATO,<sup>30</sup> Trump’s way of overpowering US interests in the region by bringing together major Middle Eastern actors, as an opposition to Iran, does not serve the same interests. It merely seeks to advance the motives of the member states, rather than the entire region.

The US is an important support for the gulf countries. It can approach Russia or China for help with trade and investment, but cannot substitute another country for the US to preserve its security interests.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, issues pertaining to the Gulf such as terrorism, mass migration and nuclear proliferation are more globally far reaching, and the US has a huge role to play in containing these issues.

The burden of history is always borne by the future. For the past wrongdoings are used to justify the ongoing oppression. The lions of history become the hunters of the present, using history as a means to fulfil their selfish political interests. Their tool is nationalism and the prey are the citizens who suffer; since ages as they seek to participate in the sins of their politicians through their tacit or expressive consent. The Palestinian nation stands on the brink of virtual extinction and the conflict stands on a point from where one can only sense fatigue, hopelessness and also the fading away of the two-nation solution. Although the annexation is temporarily halted, the fate of Arab–Israeli rapprochement depends on Israel’s commitment to respect Palestinian existence.

