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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

The Kushner-Greenblatt Plan: the Hollow Promise of Something Other than Peace

Policy Analysis Unit | June 2018

Kushner promotes “The Deal of the Century” in the Middle East

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Introduction

A high-profile delegation led by Jared Kushner, President Donald Trump's son-in-law and advisor, together with Jason Greenblatt, the White House's special envoy to the Middle East, recently concluded a tour to meet with governments in the region. The delegation met with the leaders of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Qatar as well as the Israeli government in visits intended to promote Trump's much touted "Deal of the Century" which, supposedly, would end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Shiny new branding as the "Deal of the Century" notwithstanding, the plan which Kushner and Greenblatt are busy promoting does not differ substantively from previously well publicized Israeli plans to end the conflict.

What Constitutes a "Deal of the Century"?

The White House has not formally announced the full details of their "Deal of the Century," but leaks of parts of the plan which have been published in a number of Arabic language and international media sources allow observers to draw some conclusions about the broad outlines of Washington's intentions. It is clear, for example, that the deal seeks to normalize relations between Israel and the Arab states—by brushing the Palestinian Cause under the carpet, instead of resolving it as an outstanding sore for the Arab collective. In order to execute this, Washington wants to create the right environment for the growth of bilateral relations between Tel Aviv and Arab governments. With time, the backdrop can be set for the Arab states to coerce the Palestinian National Authority into abandoning their political claims in favor of a series of economic incentives. In exchange for investments from the United States and the Gulf states, the Palestinians would be expected to give up some of the demands which have thus far been pillars of their national movement: the Right to Return for Palestinian refugees; the creation of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital; and a total end to the occupation.

In effect, the implementation of the "Deal of the Century" began unannounced and without any negotiations—it was heralded by the US Administration's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and promise to move the US Embassy to Israel to the occupied city, early in Trump's tenure. That move itself indicated that the United States was unilaterally undoing the long assumed pillars of a framework for a permanent settlement (or "final status") issues. Other than Jerusalem, these include the borders of a future Palestinian state, water rights, the status

of Jewish-only settlements built on the West Bank and the Right to Return for Palestinian refugees.

Instead of focusing on the series of well established international norms and conventions—primarily those enshrined in UN resolutions—the Kushner-Greenblatt plan is focused on establishing “economic peace” as a means to ending the conflict. Speaking to the media, Kushner also explained how the plan he is now quietly promoting across the Middle East will focus on providing large-scale investments and delivering modern infrastructure, training and other economic incentive tools not only to the Palestinians but also in Egypt and Jordan¹. Going on these details, it is difficult to see how Kushner’s “new” plan differs significantly from proposals made in years past by Shimon Peres (onetime Israeli prime minister and later president) and other Israeli politicians beginning in the 1990s.

Since that time, however, these ideas have been abandoned by all except by the Israeli right: everyone else has been able to see that merely normalizing Arab-Israeli diplomatic relations and creating economic prosperity will lead the Palestinian people to abandon their long cherished national rights and to focus instead on managing the demands of their day-to-day lives. In place of an existential national struggle they had been engaged in for 70 years, the Palestinians would instead be persuaded, the thinking goes, to struggle for better infrastructure and economic opportunities. Instead of withdrawing from occupied Jerusalem, the Israelis would hand the Palestinians the town of Abu Dis and a small constellation of Arab neighborhoods to the north and east of the Old City. Meanwhile, the Israelis would continue to hold on to racially exclusive settlements across the territory of the occupied West Bank. Specifically, the Israelis would hold on to the mega settlements which take up a large proportion of Palestinian territory: Ariel near Nablus, Gush Etzion near Bethlehem and Maale Adumim, built on land taken from the people of Abu Dis. In addition, the Israelis would only entrench their occupation of the Jordan Valley as well as throughout those areas of the West Bank classified by the existing Oslo Agreement as “Area C”—being under outright Israeli military control—which itself is most of the West Bank’s territory. The Palestinians would be expected to accept some funding from the Gulf states targeted at improving the livelihoods of the people of the Gaza Strip while custodianship of sacred Christian and Muslim places of worship in Jerusalem would be given to the Gulf states—undermining the traditional custodian of these sites, Jordan². This signals a great moment for Israeli political leaders: the White House today is returning to

¹ Read a comprehensive interview with Kushner by the Editor-in-Chief of the Palestine-based *Al Quds* newspaper, Walid Abu Al Zulf, on 24 June, 2018, available online (Arabic): <http://www.alquds.com/articles/1529795861841079700/>

² See, Zvi Bar’el, “Trump’s ‘Deal of the Century’ for the Middle East Might Live or Die in Cairo,” *Haaretz*, June 23, 2018, available online: <https://goo.gl/vFDW5C>

its involvement in the region by adopting Israeli proposals long since shown to be failures, and perhaps after deciding to add further Israeli conditions this time around.

Setting the Regional Stage

Washington's latest diplomatic maneuverings are founded on the expectation that they will secure the backing of Arab states eager to build relations with Israel as a means of finding a common ally against Iran. In seeking to achieve this, Kushner and Greenblatt prevailed on the governments of Egypt and Saudi Arabia to persuade the Palestinian Authority to accept their new "Deal". The Palestinian Authority is convinced that being undermined in this way—with the Americans attempting to sell a deal that purportedly resolves the Palestinian-Israeli conflict without ever bothering to address the Palestinian leadership directly—is convinced that the Kushner-Greenblatt plan is doomed to fail. The Palestinian presidency made this explicitly clear in a statement by spokesman Nabil Abu Rdeneh, in which the Palestinians encouraged the Americans to "abandon the illusion that selling false facts and falsifying history are going to help it sell [a peace plan]"³.

Kushner has become openly hostile to the Palestinian Authority as a result. In statements that suggest out-and-out blackmail, Kushner has threatened to make details of his plan public—the implication being that the Authority does not have the interests of its own people at heart. Kushner and Greenblatt also want to depict the Authority in Ramallah as uninterested in the suffering of the Palestinian people, and as being responsible for the unending agony on the Gaza Strip. This was the clear undertone of the joint statement issued by Kushner and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in which they appeared to blame the Palestinian Authority's refusal to be dictated to for Palestinian suffering⁴. Seeking to flex their muscles beyond this rhetoric, the Trump Administration also failed to pay its financial commitment—of \$350 million—to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), putting at risk the lives of 1 million UNRWA registered refugees in the Gaza Strip⁵.

³ "Palestinian official: US peace plan doomed to fail," The Associated Press, 23 June, 2018, available online: <https://www.apnews.com/2b455f872f344256b73f5d2f2a8a43cc>

⁴ "PM Netanyahu Meets with Jared Kushner Jason Greenblatt and David Friedman," Prime Minister's Office, June 22, 2018, accessed on 26/6/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/ejMgdb>

⁵ "US Quietly Freezes Aid to Palestinians under Taylor Force Act, Reports Israeli Media," *Mondoweiss*, 27 June, 2018, available online: <http://mondoweiss.net/2018/06/quietly-freezes-palestinians/>

Some of the Arab states visited by Kushner—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt—have all voiced their support for the White House plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In doing so, they have voiced their contempt and defiance for the Palestinian Authority⁶. Although the Arab governments in question couched their statements with proclamations of “supporting international efforts towards a just and comprehensive solution rooted in the two-state solution,” the Kushner-Greenblatt plan is demonstrably a capitulation, giving Israel most of the land of the West Bank and control of a unitary Jerusalem. The Palestinians would be given nothing more than the major urban centers in the West Bank. Israel, which would get to keep most of the land, would also get to free itself of most of the population in that region. As for the Gaza Strip, it would become reduced to a humanitarian issue, with the Gulf States picking up the tab for reconstruction, relief and services provision in the tiny enclave.

It is highly likely that those Arab states that proclaimed their support for the Kushner-Greenblatt plan—disregarding all of the rights of the Palestinian people and reducing their national aspirations to a series of economic demands—will in time become instruments of US pressure to coax the Palestinian Authority as well as Hamas—which governs the Gaza Strip—into accepting the American-Israeli terms. Similarly under pressure is Jordan: facing unprecedented social, political and economic pressures, the Hashemite Kingdom’s traditional stewardship of holy sites in Jerusalem is now being called into question⁷. Attesting to Jordanian implication in this latest crisis is the shuttle diplomacy which saw Netanyahu visit the country to discuss bilateral ties with King Abdullah II only one day before Kushner arrived in the region. The communique issued by the Royal Court in Amman did mention the country’s role as a protector of Muslim and Christian holy sites in Palestine, but also spoke of hope for growing economic cooperation between Amman and Tel Aviv, as well as for a lifting of the restrictions between the Palestinian and Jordanian markets⁸.

⁶ “Four Arab states ‘support US plan’ for peace in the Middle East,” *Al Jazeera*,

⁷ Molley Hunter & Conor Finnegan, “When Trump ‘makes a promise, he keeps it,’ Kushner says as Jerusalem embassy opens amid protests,” ABC News, May 14, 2018, accessed on 26/6/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/qBUvhA>

⁸ “Remarks by President Trump and His Majesty King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Before Bilateral Meeting,” White House, June 21, 2018, accessed on 26/6/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/993aBP>

Conclusion

For almost a century now, successive White House administrations have sought to find ways of resolving the Palestinian question. This latest plan is decidedly, and by far, the worst. It cannot be described as a solution to a crisis, but rather as the intention to impose the Israeli perspective on the Palestinians. Specifically, the plan presupposes that the Palestinians are not entitled to their own national aspirations, but merely to a series of economic measures to ease their lives. The Kushner-Greenblatt plan shall not, however, come to pass so long as the Palestinian Authority—backed in this case by Palestinian and wider global public opinion—remains steadfast in its position and continues to champion their rights. Only the approval of the Palestinian people could give any potential plan the legitimacy needed to be implemented.