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Trump's Plan to 'Cleanse' Gaza: Origins and Implications

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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US President Donald Trump's proposal to permanently displace more than two million Palestinians from the Gaza Strip to Egypt and Jordan, while the US takes over "long-term" ownership of the territory, develops it as real estate and turns it into the "Riviera of the Middle East",¹ has sparked a wave of condemnation. Palestinians, Arabs, and world powers have criticised the idea, which has been categorically rejected by Egypt and Jordan. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has welcomed it. Trump made his announcement after meeting Netanyahu at the White House on 4 February, his first meeting with a foreign leader since returning to the presidency.

The Proposal

Israel's desire to empty the Gaza Strip of its inhabitants stretches back decades, but took a more serious turn with the start of Israel's war on the territory in October 2023, when Israeli officials began openly talking about their intentions to ethnically cleanse Gaza. Yet Washington, under then-president Joe Biden, officially opposed calls for forced displacement.

The idea of "cleansing" the Gaza Strip of its inhabitants began to emerge among Trump's inner circle last year, as seen a statement last year by his son-in-law Jared Kushner, who was in charge of US policy towards the Middle East during the real estate mogul's first administration (2017-2021). On 15 February 2024, during an interview at Harvard University, Kushner said that "Gaza's waterfront property could be very valuable." He explicitly suggested that Israel move Palestinians from the Strip to the Negev Desert and Egypt, and then "clean (Gaza) up."

While Kushner, who has great influence over Trump, said Israel had not "stated that they don't want the people to move back there afterwards," he added: "I am not sure there is much left of Gaza at this point." Perhaps his most dangerous comment, was his claim that Gaza had never been inhabited historically. He claimed: "Gaza was not really a historical precedent [sic]. It was the result of a war. You had tribes in different places and then Gaza became a thing."²

In October 2024, during Trump's re-election campaign, he said in a radio interview that Gaza could be "one of the best places in the world," but that the Palestinians "never took advantage" of its Mediterranean coastal location. He added that Gaza "could be better than Monaco" because it had the "best location" in the Middle East.³ Trump returned to the idea shortly after his inauguration on 20 January 2025, saying Gaza was "a phenomenal location, on the sea, the best weather... Some beautiful things could be done with it." He added that his administration "might" be willing to help rebuild the Strip.⁴

¹ Will Weissert, Michelle L. Price & Zeke Miller, "Trump Talks Gaza Takeover and other Takeaways from his Appearance with Netanyahu," *Associated Press*, 5/2/2025, accessed on 10/2/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQz4>

² Patrick Wintour, "Jared Kushner Says Gaza's 'Waterfront Property could be very Valuable,'" *The Guardian*, 19/3/2024, accessed on 10/2/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQww>

³ Rebecca Falconer & Sareen Habeshian, "Trump says Gaza 'could be better than Monaco' once it's rebuilt," *Axios*, 8/10/2024, accessed on 10/2/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQSV>

⁴ Kevin Liptak, Alayna Treene & Jeff Zeleny, "How Trump Arrived at his Stunning Idea to 'Take over' the Gaza Strip," *CNN*, 5/2/2025, accessed on 10/2/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQlq>



However, Trump's first clear indication that he supported displacing the Palestinians from Gaza came on 25 January, when he said he had spoken with Jordan's King Abdullah II about the possibility of moving more than a million and a half Palestinians to Jordan and Egypt, either temporarily or permanently, until Gaza is "cleaned up." He repeated this demand in a call with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Although both countries categorically rejected his request, he has continued to claim that they would eventually accept it.

The striking point here is that Trump, his son-in-law Kushner, and his Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff, all real estate developers and businessmen, view the Gaza Strip as a "real estate deal" in which they want to invest – not for the benefit of its Palestinian residents, but for other customers. The territory's residents would never be allowed to return, but would rather be settled elsewhere.

Trump's Half-Baked Plan

Trump's statements about his desire to seize and develop Gaza appears to have surprised even senior officials in his administration,⁵ especially his announcement at the press conference with Netanyahu that his administration "do what is necessary" to take control of the territory.⁶ A handful of aides in Trump's inner circle, most notably Witkoff and National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, were aware of what the president was planning to propose at his meeting with Netanyahu.⁷ Accounts diverge on whether the Israelis were informed in advance, with one source saying that Waltz and Witkoff had discussed the idea with Netanyahu the day before his meeting with Trump,⁸ while others say Trump first told the Israeli premier about the idea of a US takeover shortly before it was presented to reporters.⁹

Although Trump was reading from notes when he made his proposal during the press conference with Netanyahu, suggesting that it was an official, pre-planned announcement rather than an off-the-cuff suggestion, White House officials say the proposal was not discussed by administration officials concerned with Middle East affairs. Nor was there any debate over whether it is feasible or realistic. US media reports indicate that the departments of State and Defense were not informed in advance or offered the chance to give feedback or set up committees to work on the idea. Nor did the Department of Defense provide estimates of the number of American forces that would be required to seize control the Strip, how they would do so, or how much it would cost.¹⁰

All this suggests that the idea arose from discussions between Trump and a small number of his advisors, in contrast to the normal process for formulating major policies in the US. Therefore, the

⁵ Liptak et al., *ibid.*

⁶ Weissert et al., *ibid.*

⁷ Liptak et al., *ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Kevin Liptak, Alayna Treene & Jeff Zeleny, "How Trump Arrived at his Stunning Idea to 'Take over' the Gaza Strip," *CNN*, 5/2/2025, accessed on 10/2/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQlq>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*



move can be described as more of an idea than a comprehensive, carefully formulated plan. This is evident in the state of chaos within the Trump administration after his statement, as officials sought to roll back their extent, not least as the move would represent a blatant violation of international law, and have no clear basis in American law that would authorize Trump to move forward with the plan.

White House spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt announced on 5 February that Trump had not committed to sending US troops to the Gaza Strip.¹¹ Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth said the US government was "a very long way" from intervening in the Strip.¹² That is despite Trump's insistence that his administration would "do what is necessary" to take it over. Leavitt also added that the Palestinians' departure from Gaza would be "temporary," contradicting Trump's clear statement that it would be permanent. She also added that the US would not provide any reconstruction money.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who sources say was not previously involved in the proposal but expressed support for it, tried to soften Trump's statements by saying the plan was not a "hostile move" but rather a "very generous" plan by the US to help rebuild Gaza. He added that in "many parts of (Gaza), even if people move back, they would have nowhere to live safely because there are still unexploded munitions and debris and rubble."¹³

In another indication of the lack of clarity on the question within his administration, Trump returned on 6 February to confirm that Israel would hand over the Gaza Strip to the United States "at the conclusion of fighting" and that Gazans "would have already been resettled in far safer and more beautiful communities."¹⁴ He did not clarify what he meant by this, nor whether it would mean the US would allow Israel to resume its aggression against Gaza or displace its residents by military force, or by preventing humanitarian aid and reconstruction materials from entering the territory.

Trump's insinuations contrast with his boasting that he was responsible for pushing through a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip one day before he assumed the presidency. Not even a day had passed before Trump confirmed that "the U.S. would view (the Gaza move) as a real estate transaction. We will be an investor in this part of the world. No rush to do anything."¹⁵ As criticism of the proposal escalated, he acted more like a real estate developer than an American president in his approach to Gaza.¹⁶ His National Security Advisor, Mike Waltz, tried to justify the proposal, saying: "The fact that nobody has a realistic solution, and he puts some very bold, fresh new ideas out on the table, I don't think should be criticized in any way... I think it's going to bring the entire region to come with their own solutions if they don't like Mr. Trump's solution."¹⁷

11 Alex Gangitano, "Trump Says Gaza will be Given to US by Israel," *The Hill*, 7/2/2025, accessed on 10/2/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQGR>

12 Ibid.

13 Ewan Palmer, "Donald Trump Is Already in Reverse," *Newsweek*, 7/2/2025, accessed on 10/2/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQqH>

14 Tinsui Yeung, "Trump says Israel will hand over Gaza to US after fighting ends," *BBC News*, 6/2/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRaX>

15 Barak Ravid, "Trump calls Gaza takeover a 'real estate' deal but says there is 'no rush'," *Axios*, 7/2/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQx2>

16 Liptak et al., *ibid.*

17 Swan, *ibid.*



Criticism of Trump's proposal came not only from Arab governments and other world powers, or from Democrats, but also from within the Republican party, where some see the move as a retreat from the "America First" slogan meant to guide Trump's foreign policy. In this view, the US president's ambitions to control one of the world's worst disaster zones stands in contrast with his criticism of his predecessors' involvement in "forever wars," or of George W. Bush's attempt to rebuild Iraq after the US-led invasion in 2003. Trump's Republican critics have pointed out that taking control of and rebuilding the Gaza Strip, which would cost tens of billions of dollars, also contrasts with his campaign to close Washington's international development agency USAID on the grounds that it wastes billions of dollars in foreign aid each year.

Repercussions of the Proposal

Trump's insistence on his plan to displace the residents of Gaza will have major repercussions, especially since he has also intimated that his administration is mulling the possibility of recognizing Israel's annexation of large swathes of the West Bank.¹⁸ Some in Washington fear that the proposal alone could lead to increased violence in the region,¹⁹ sabotaging the Gaza ceasefire agreement and the exchange of prisoners between Hamas and Israel, especially as Netanyahu is using every means possible to evade implementation of the second and third stages of the agreement brokered by Qatar, Egypt, and the US. Indeed, several right-wing Israeli ministers have made statements supporting Trump's idea of ethnically cleansing the Gaza Strip, including Defence Minister Israel Katz's order to the army to prepare a plan for the voluntary exit of Gaza residents.²⁰

Netanyahu described Trump's proposal as "It's a remarkable idea and I think it should be really pursued, examined, pursued and done, because I think it will create a different future for everyone... It definitely changes the equation in the Middle East (and could lead to) peaceful Middle East."²¹ However, it is not clear whether Israel really wants to hand the US ownership of Gaza, a territory it considers its own by right. Israel likely wants to leverage Trump's ability to pressure Arab states to accept the idea of exiling the residents of the Gaza Strip and contributing to its reconstruction, with international support, then enabling its control under arrangements with Washington, possibly with guarantees for Trump's companies and partners. Whatever the case, Netanyahu clearly left happy after his meeting with Trump, who missed an opportunity to pressure the Israeli premier to abide by the ceasefire agreement – for which the US president claims credit.

¹⁸ "Trump: US will Announce Position on West Bank Annexation over Next Four Weeks," *The Jerusalem Post*, 5/2/2025, accessed on 10/2/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQFU>

¹⁹ Swan, *ibid.*

²⁰ "Israeli Military to Prepare 'Voluntary Departure' Plan for Gazans, Echoing Trump Proposal," *The Washington Post*, 6/2/2025, accessed on 10/2/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zR6c>

²¹ "Netanyahu on Trump's Gaza Strip Plan: 'A Remarkable Idea, Must Be Pursued and Implemented'," *Nova.News*, 6/2/2025 at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRI9>



Some in Washington warn that Trump's insistence on this proposal may hinder his other efforts to expand the Abraham Accords, especially after Saudi Arabia announced its firm rejection of any effort to displace Palestinians from the Strip, and its confirmation that it will not normalize relations with Israel without guarantees of the establishment of a Palestinian state, something Netanyahu completely rules out. They point out that the idea of the US taking over Gaza turns decades of official American support for the two-state solution on its head, and is likely to drag the US into the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in a way that presidents since Harry Truman have striven to avoid. What is more, Trump's pressure on Jordan and Egypt could lead to unrest within the two countries, both US allies.

Conclusion

Some of Trump's advisors believe that his proposal for US control over the Gaza Strip is unfeasible and will fade over time after he realizes that fact.²² However, this will depend primarily on the level of resistance that Trump's proposal faces on the Palestinian, Arab and international levels. Trump's views and policies are not a foregone conclusion, provided that the Palestinians and Arab governments take a position that not only rejects them, but also presents a practical plan to keep the Palestinian people on their land in the Gaza Strip, and to ensure the territory is rebuilt.

Such a response to Trump's dangerous, provocative project must begin with the Arabs breaking of the siege on the Gaza Strip, via Egypt, and providing aid, relief, and temporary housing to its residents – without coordination or waiting for permission from those responsible for genocide and planning to displace Gazans. Next, they should pressure the Palestinians to rebuild the Palestinian Liberation Organization and to establish a body affiliated with the Palestinian Authority to manage Gaza. They should also form an Arab or Arab-Islamic body that sets out reconstruction plan and the necessary budget to implement it, as well as urging the Palestinians to file compensation lawsuits against Israel, and supporting them in this endeavour. Only a plan of this nature can block Trump and Netanyahu's project and put an end to their tampering with the destinies of the region's peoples.

22 Swan, *ibid.*