

From MAGA to Gaza

Donald Trump's eye-popping plan to make Gaza American

Is his call to evict Palestinians from the “hell hole” an imperial fantasy or a negotiating ploy?



Photograph: picture alliance

Feb 5th 2025|JERUSALEM AND WASHINGTON, DC

GAZANS HAVE lived through 15 months of war between Hamas and Israel, have been repeatedly displaced and have suffered tens of thousands of deaths. But neither they nor anyone else could have predicted President Donald Trump's [astonishing plan](#) to end their misery: the eviction of the entire Palestinian population and a full American takeover to redevelop Gaza into the “riviera of the Middle East”.

Arab politicians expressed alarm. In a joint letter penned a day earlier, as Mr Trump started to talk about moving Palestinians out of Gaza, five Arab foreign ministers warned the United States that such a deportation would “push the region towards more tension, conflict and instability”. In America some allies of the president hailed a stroke of genius; others looked askance. Most Israelis are probably bemused. A far-right minister rejoiced, quoting a Biblical psalm: “The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad.”

Mr Trump hurled his bolt after a meeting at the White House with Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister. The president said America “will take over the Gaza Strip, and we will do a job with it too. We'll own it and be responsible for dismantling all of the dangerous unexploded bombs and other weapons on the site.” America, he added, would take “a long-term ownership position”. Asked about the potential deployment of American troops, Mr Trump said, “As far as Gaza is concerned, we'll do what is necessary. If it's necessary, we'll do that.”

The president insisted he was entirely serious: “This was not a decision made lightly. Everybody I've spoken to loves the idea of the United States owning that piece of land, developing and creating thousands of jobs with something that will be magnificent.” Palestinians, he said, could not live in the desolation of Gaza, which he labelled “a demolition site”. Better for other countries to “open their hearts”, take them in and resettle them in new communities. Once rebuilt, people “from all over the world” would live in Gaza, including some Palestinians.

Mr Netanyahu seemed in equal parts delighted and non-plussed. He did not entertain the proposal in any detail, but praised Mr Trump for taking discussions to “another level” and noted vaguely: “I think it's worth paying attention to this...I think it's something that could change history.”

Mr Trump did not say how his ideas could be enacted and at times appeared to be improvising. To some Americans they looked like yet more imperial fancy—akin to his provocative talk of retaking the Panama Canal or buying Greenland—except more dangerous. Indeed, some worried that the president had forgotten America's bloody misadventures in Afghanistan and Iraq, which Mr Trump has long denounced. Still others wondered

whether, as with his threats of tariffs, Mr Trump set out an outlandish position from which to extract negotiating leverage. Republicans in Congress were sceptical. “I think that might be problematic,” one senator, Lindsey Graham, told Politico. “There’s probably a couple of kinks in that slinky,” chimed another.

Mr Trump would scarcely be the first American president to try to solve the puzzle of Palestine, a holy land claimed by two peoples as theirs, often by divine right. Most peace proposals, including one from Mr Trump during his first term, have involved the formal partition of the land into a Palestinian state and a Jewish one. These have often provoked more violence. Mr Trump expressed frustration with decades of failed peace plans and reconstruction efforts. “You can’t keep doing the same mistake over and over again,” he complained. “Gaza is a hell hole right now.”

Yet the notion of a Western colonial enterprise in Palestine has not been considered since Britain gave up the mandate for the territory in 1947 after years of violence. Indeed, America turned down early proposals that it should itself take up mandates in the Middle East after the collapse of the Ottoman empire in the first world war.

Mr Trump appears to have plucked disparate ideas from the cauldron of the Middle East: the removal of [Hamas](#) from Gaza demanded by Mr Netanyahu; the eviction of Palestinians sought by his far-right allies; old dreams of turning Gaza into another Dubai or Singapore; the hope of Arab petrodollars for its reconstruction; and calls for America to lead a peacekeeping force. To all this Mr Trump has also added the real-estate mogul’s zeal for redevelopment, eyeing up more than 360 square kilometres of prime Mediterranean land, much of it already a demolition site after the campaign by Israel’s forces.

Mr Netanyahu’s team had prepared for a different set of talks. They had expected Mr Trump to urge Israel to move from the first phase of the current ceasefire deal into the second phase, involving a permanent cessation of hostilities and a full withdrawal of Israeli forces. At that stage, more Israeli and other hostages would be swapped for Palestinian prisoners. The third phase would involve the rebuilding of Gaza. All this would prepare the way for a momentous agreement with Saudi Arabia to normalise relations with Israel, in exchange for progress towards Palestinian statehood, thereby forging a grand coalition of America, Israel and pro-Western Arab regimes. Mr Trump’s idea that America would carve out Gaza for itself was beyond the Israelis’ imagination.

Mr Netanyahu knows well the difficulties of such a plan. Gazans, mostly descended from previous waves of Palestinian refugees and repeatedly displaced during the latest fighting, would not volunteer for another *nakba*, or “catastrophe”, the name Palestinians give to their displacement during the birth of Israel in 1947-48. Even if Gazans left willingly America would be overseeing ethnic cleansing. And Arab leaders, though privately indifferent to the Palestinians’ plight, cannot be seen to connive in such measures. In any case, no Arab country wants to take in another large population of disgruntled Palestinians. Egypt and Jordan have turned down Mr Trump’s entreaties to take Gazans, but he predicted they would change their minds. “They say they’re not going to accept. I say they will.”

Mr Netanyahu seems willing to play along, both to strengthen bonds with Mr Trump and to exploit his plan for domestic advantage. The prime minister is in a precarious position. He lost one far-right coalition partner when he accepted phase one of the ceasefire, and could lose more allies, led by the finance minister Bezalel Smotrich, by accepting phase two. That would spell the end of his government, early elections and, potentially, greater legal vulnerability in corruption cases that he faces.

Mr Netanyahu has tried to buy himself more time. He insists he has three goals which must all be met: the ceasefire with the release of all hostages; the total destruction of Hamas’s military and governing capabilities; and the guarantee that Hamas cannot return to power. Rather than accepting a permanent ceasefire quickly, Mr Netanyahu says “Israel will end the war by winning the war.”

That opens a potentially damaging gap with Mr Trump, who expressed confidence that the ceasefire deal will be implemented fully and whose chief negotiator says phase two has begun. But the president’s Gaza plan may throw the prime minister a lifeline. Even if he enters the second phase, Mr Smotrich will probably not bring down the government and jeopardise his dream of the Gaza Strip being emptied of Palestinians. Mr Trump may

think of building glitzy hotels and condominiums in Gaza, but Mr Smotrich is determined to resettle Jewish communities there.

That threat explains Saudi Arabia's prompt riposte, which said it would "not establish diplomatic relations with Israel" without the creation of a Palestinian state. But Mr Netanyahu may yet see Mr Trump's Gaza plan as a bargaining chip. Might the Saudis accept a deal that forestalls Mr Trump's plan and saves Palestinians from mass expulsion? The United Arab Emirates, after all, justified normalising relations with Israel in 2020 by arguing it had put a stop to Israeli plans to annex the occupied West Bank. Saudi officials insist they will not.

One bewildered Arab diplomat says his ministry is trying to work out whether this was just a Trumpian riff, soon to be forgotten, or something more considered. Arab leaders are wary of antagonising the president. But if Mr Trump is serious about his latest proposal, a forceful condemnation may follow. As for Mr Trump, he has built his success on the idea of "Make America Great Again". His devotees probably did not sign up for "Make Gaza American". ■