US 'Peace Plan' for the Middle East

On 28 January 2020, United States President Donald Trump released his administration’s ‘vision for Israeli-Palestinian peace’. The White House Plan, coupled with earlier Trump administration moves, marks a distinct departure from past US policy on the Middle East Peace Process. Key elements are illegal under international law, as they advocate the annexation of occupied territory. Israeli leaders have welcomed the plan, seen as meeting Israel’s key demands. The leadership of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas have been united in rejecting the proposal, and the PA has since cut ties with Israel and the USA. The plan is meant to serve as the basis for future direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, to stretch over four years. However, the Israeli government has announced plans to implement parts of it unilaterally in the near future.

Key points of the White House plan

**Palestinian statehood.** The ‘Peace to Prosperity’ plan would see Israel agree to the creation of a future Palestinian state as set out in ‘a conceptual map’. However, the establishment of a – demilitarised – Palestinian state within four years is subject to several conditions, which are difficult to meet under current circumstances. They include the Palestinian Authority (PA) taking control in Gaza, the disarming of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other armed groups, a commitment to non-violence and recognition of Israel as ‘the nation state of the Jewish people’. The capital of the Palestinian state would comprise a Palestinian town outside the city of Jerusalem and several eastern Jerusalem neighbourhoods (see below).

**Borders and Israeli settlements.** Israel would acquire sovereignty over about 30% of the West Bank, through the annexation of the vast majority of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, as well as most of the Jordan Valley. A future Palestinian state would incorporate the remainder of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as additional land located in the desert straddling the Israeli-Egyptian border. The total would be ‘reasonably comparable in size to the West Bank and Gaza’, with the non-contiguous areas connected by roads, bridges and tunnels. Many commentators have likened the result to a ‘Swiss Cheese’.

**Security arrangements.** A future Palestinian state would be demilitarised. Israel would ‘maintain overriding security responsibility for the State of Palestine’, including control of border crossings, airspace and the electromagnetic spectrum. Counter-terrorism efforts would remain under Israeli control until the Palestinian security apparatus meets predefined security criteria.

**Palestinian refugees.** The plan explicitly renounces Palestinian refugees’ ‘right to return’ to Israel (a key Palestinian demand in previous negotiations), instead offering them the option of ‘absorption into the State of Palestine’, or ‘local integration in current host countries’, or in third countries (subject to their agreement).

**Jerusalem.** The plan proposes that Jerusalem become the ‘undivided capital of Israel’, giving Israeli sovereignty over all parts of the city west of the Israeli separation barrier, including most of East Jerusalem, with nearly 300 000 Palestinian residents, and the Old City. It disregards Palestinians’ claim to all of East Jerusalem. Palestinians are offered a capital in Abu Dis, and several neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem, including Kafir Aqab and Shuafat (see map). It is ambiguous and potentially provocative regarding the city’s holy sites, advocating ‘maintaining the status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram a-Sharif’, but permitting ‘people of every faith to pray there’.

**Economic framework.** The second part of the plan, which the White House had already released in June 2019, comprises a US$50 billion economic plan, intended to spur the Palestinian economy.
US endorsement of key Israeli positions

In December 2017, the USA recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, mirroring the official Israeli position on the status of the city, and subsequently moved the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. On 21 March 2019, President Trump announced that the USA would recognise Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which Israel captured from Syria in 1967. On 18 November 2019, the Trump administration declared that Israel's West Bank settlements did not violate international law. During the unveiling of the plan on 28 January 2020, President Trump said that the USA would 'recognise Israeli sovereignty over the territory' that the plan provides to be part of the state of Israel. Emboldened by the plan, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that his government would move to annex Jewish West Bank settlements and the Jordan Valley, but only after the Israeli elections on 2 March 2020. Left-wing Israeli politicians have spoken out against the White House plan.

Reactions to the plan

The Palestinian leadership severed contact with the US administration after the latter recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December 2017. In June 2019, the Palestinian leadership rejected the economic part of the US plan, calling the 96-page document 'meaningless' and 'impractical'. The PA has refused to be involved in the elaboration of the political part of the US administration's peace plan, having lost faith in the role of the US as an 'honest broker'. On 1 February 2020, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas announced that the Palestinian Authority would cut ties with Israel and the USA over the proposed plan, including over security cooperation. The Arab League has unanimously rejected the 'US-Israeli deal of the century', as has the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Arab states, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon, agreed 'not to cooperate with the US administration to implement the plan'. Reactions from Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Qatar had earlier shown qualified support, calling for the renewal of negotiations, while three Gulf Arab states (Oman, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates) actually attended the unveiling of the plan at the White House on 28 January 2020. Russia has questioned the feasibility of the White House plan, noting that it contravenes several United Nations (UN) resolutions. The PA is calling for a UN Security Council resolution to condemn the US peace plan. The USA is expected to veto the resolution, in which case it is likely to be submitted for a vote to the UN General Assembly.

The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians

There have been many attempts to resolve the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians since the Middle East war of June 1967, in which Israel occupied the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Gaza, the Golan Heights and parts of the Sinai peninsula. UN Security Council Resolution 242, passed on 22 November 1967, embodies the principle that has guided most of the peace negotiations – the exchange of land for peace. Clause 1 of Resolution 242 called for Israel to withdraw from the 'territories' conquered in 1967, including the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Efforts to resolve the dispute between Palestinians and Israelis have centred on the principle of a 'two-state solution' to the conflict, with an independent Palestinian state created alongside the state of Israel. One of the most intractable issues in peace talks has been Jerusalem. The Israeli 1980 Basic Law on Jerusalem declared Jerusalem to be the 'complete and united' capital of Israel. Israel officially rejects any division of the city, the seat of the Israeli government. Palestinians, for their part, seek to establish the capital of their future Palestinian state in East Jerusalem. The international consensus has so far been that Jerusalem would have to be the capital of both states, in a manner to be agreed between the two sides in the conflict during 'final status' negotiations. Other critical issues have been the approximately 230 settlements Israel has built in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, home to approximately 660 000 Israelis; and the right of return to Israel of Palestinians who fled Israel in 1948, as well as their descendants. There are 5.5 million registered Palestine refugees across the Middle East.

The position of the European Union and the European Parliament

In reaction to the White House plan, EU High Representative Josep Borrell recalled the established EU position and commitment to a negotiated, viable two-state solution, respecting all relevant UN resolutions and internationally agreed parameters. He criticised the US initiative as departing from these parameters and noted that the EU does not recognise Israeli sovereignty over territories occupied in 1967, that annexation of such territories would be contrary to international law, and that such a move would 'not pass unchallenged'. In 2017, the European Parliament reiterates its strong support for the two-state solution, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states. In 2014, Parliament recognised Palestine statehood.

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