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THE CURRENT: What does Trump's Middle East plan mean for Israel and Palestine?

January 29, 2020

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

On Tuesday, standing alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Pres Trump announced his long-promised plan for Israel and the Palestinian territories, laying out a vision for a potential Palestinian state, albeit one that largely matches a right-wing Israeli vision.

With us to discuss contents of the plan and the U.S. Israeli domestic politics that are framing it is Tamara Wittes, senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy here at Brookings and former deputy assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs. Tamara, thanks for being here.

WITTES: Great to be with you.

PITA: Maybe I can ask you to start with politics and timing of it. On the one hand, Trump been promising us his "Deal of the Century" for a while now; on the other, he is facing trial in the Senate for corruption, Benjamin Netanyahu realized he was not going to get immunity protection and was indicted for corruption and bribery back at home. What's playing into this plan coming together now?

WITTES: It's true the Trump administration came into office planning to unveil a bold, new approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and they have several false starts as they reached out to other governments in the region, particularly in the Arab Gulf, who threw up various concerns and obstacles. They were distracted by other regional matters, including the fight against ISIS and confrontation with Iran. And then of course, when you rely on a very small coterie of family and friends to help you drive your policy, those folks get over-burdened and they can't necessarily get everything done in a timely fashion.

I think all of that helps account for the delay, but fundamentally for, I think both Donald Trump and for Israeli supporters of this plan, it was kind of a now-or-never moment, ultimately. They didn't manage to get all of the regional buy-in that they had hoped, but with the Israeli election – the third Israeli parliamentary election coming up on March 2, they couldn't be sure that Netanyahu and the right wing would remain dominant in Israeli politics. And then President Trump himself is getting close to re-election in November. So, they wanted to get these ideas out on the table at a time when both of these men could take maximum advantage of them. And then in addition to that, of course, it's helpful to have

a nice, showy distraction during the week that the Senate is trying the president's impeachment, and on the day that Prime Minister Netanyahu is indicted in Israeli court.

PITA: Maybe you can break down some of the major details of the plan. There's a common description that gets used for how the West Bank shapes out, that it's a "Swiss cheese state where all the Palestinians get are the holes." Is that the future vision? What are some of the other elements that go into this?

WITTES: I think that if you're talking about territorial dispositions, "Swiss cheese" is a good descriptor, but there's a much more fundamental structure to this plan that it's important to understand. Which is that, the Trump proposal says, "here is our outline for the way things should end up, here's our map of the way thing should end up, what should be Israeli territory, what should be Palestinian territory, and we are ready to accept and recognize Israeli sovereignty over the territories we assign to them right away." But Palestinian statehood, Palestinian self-determination is conditional on a set of rather onerous requirements and also subject to a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. So, even though the plan was announced as a basis for Israeli-Palestinian negotiation and agreement, the way it's structured, it's an American diktat. "This is our vision, we're giving the Israelis permission to implement our vision now, and the Palestinians can either get on board or not. We don't care either way."

PITA: One of the major elements is about the fate of the Jordan Valley and the annexation of Israeli settlements. Can you go into a little more detail on those elements?

WITTES: Yes, so the reason that the map on the Trump proposal looks like a Palestinian statelet that is a slice of Swiss cheese is that the guiding principle for territorial separation is that not a single Israeli should have to be relocated from the Jewish settlements that have been built across the West Bank in the years since 1967. Now, in previous rounds of Israeli-Palestinian negotiation and American mediation, there had been discussion about Israeli keeping major territorial blocks with the vast majority of Israeli settlers in them. Those are close to Israeli proper and they would be then absorbed into Israel and compensatory land would be given to the Palestinian state within Israel. But this plan doesn't want to move any Israeli settlers. It wants all of those Israeli settlements to become part of sovereign Israel. What that means is that it draws Israeli territory in horizontal bands in two particular places that run east-west through what would otherwise be the Palestinian state, and it gives Israel the entire Jordan Valley on security grounds, and there are some Israeli settlements there as well. And then, where there are small Israeli settlements that are fairly isolated, geographically, from the rest of Israel, those would become sovereign Israeli enclaves within Palestinian territory.

And so when you take those three things together, it essentially chops up what would be allocated to the Palestinian state into a bunch of different, non-contiguous territorial blocks which would be connected by roads, bridges, and tunnels. Those roads, bridges, and tunnels would be under Israeli control. So the Israelis would retain, in essence, full control over Palestinian movement even within the Palestinian state. And that's before you get to the question of the relationship between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip which are quite geographically different.

PITA: You mentioned some of the onerous requirements on the Palestinians within this deal. Can you go into more detail on that?

WITTES: Sure, some of them have been articulated before and they relate to fairly reasonable demands around financial management, transparency, human rights, and so on. All of that is all well and good. The particularly unrealistic demands are that the Palestinian government – which, the plan says explicitly might be the Palestinian Authority or it might be something else that’s acceptable to the Israelis – that Palestinian government would have to get control of the Gaza Strip, which is now under the control of Hamas, which is a U.S.-recognized terrorist organization. And Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and all the other terrorist groups and militias within Gaza would have to be disarmed. And of course the plan does not indicate how the Palestinians are supposed to make that happen; it doesn’t offer any particular American assistance to make that happen. And so it’s not at all clear how it could ever happen. So, if that’s a prerequisite to American recognition or acceptance of Palestinian statehood, it’s hard to see how you ever, ever reach that goal.

PITA: So many elements of this plan – in addition to the territorial aspects you just talked about, and the requirements for the Palestinians, as well as the capital being in eastern Jerusalem, not East Jerusalem – so many of them make it seem like a complete non-starter. Is anyone on the U.S. or Israeli side – is this meant entirely to play to their domestic audiences, or is anyone actually thinking they’ve got the Palestinians over a barrel due to their own economic and political situations? Who’s really thinking that this is going to go anywhere?

WITTES: The Trump administration from the beginning has been pretty explicit in its understanding of the conflict as being pretty different from prior administrations and indeed from much of the international community. I believe Jared Kushner himself on the record has described what the Palestinians have in refusing to accept Israel, what they have is a “declining asset” he said. And so it’s been the view of the Trump administration that it’s important to demonstrate to the Palestinians that every day they fail to come to an agreement with Israel, what they might be able to gain from such an agreement will shrink. This plan does do that quite effectively. In fact, what it says, is, in effect, you will get this minimal statelet that is explicitly not fully sovereign, and this is what’s available to you right now. Four years from now, if you haven’t accepted this offer, all bets are off. We’re ready to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank territories we allocate to Israel today and we’re asking them not to build in your territories for the next four years, but after that, who knows what we might do?

So it really is a diktat. It’s not something that leaves much room for Palestinians to negotiate with Israelis and come to a common understanding. I think also, if you look at what this would mean in practice, if it’s actually implemented on the ground, it wouldn’t actually change much for Palestinians. They already exist in an environment where Israel has effective control over their movement, their territory, their building, their economy; none of that would change, really, under this proposal. There’s no provision for Palestine to have its own access to the outside world. Israel would retain all of the borders around what’s now Israel and the West Bank, including territorial waters. So, even if Palestinians built a port in Gaza, it would not be able to get ships to or from that port without Israeli permission. So it just takes the occupation and takes the conflict and puts it into a new phase. It doesn’t resolve it.

PITA: Lastly, Mahmoud Abbas has already said, “After the nonsense that we heard today we say a thousand nos to the Deal of The Century.” What can we expect from Palestinians as well as the neighbors, Egypt and Jordan, reaction from the region?

WITTES: We've seen a little bit of reaction from regional governments already. I would say that primarily that reaction has been, "well, we appreciate the American effort and we really want to see direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations resume." Not commenting on the substance of the American proposals to avoid offense. The Jordanians have been a little more explicit though, since they have a little more at stake. They've been consistent for quite a while saying that Israeli annexation of the Jordan Valley is unacceptable to them. They said again yesterday that any Israeli unilateral action including annexation would be very dangerous.

And I think for the Jordanians, they have a lot at stake because this is their border, too, but because half their population is Palestinian. And unlike every other Arab country that took in Palestinian refugees, they gave Palestinian refugees citizenship in Jordan. And that citizenship is reflected in Jordanian preferences and Jordanian policy, as it should be. In addition to that, I think there are specific elements around the disposition of holy sites in Jerusalem – the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in particular – where the plan is a little bit contradictory but suggests that the status quo in the Temple Mount should be changed to allow Jews to pray at will in the Temple Mount, and Temple Mount is currently under Jordanian responsibility, although it is under Israeli territorial control. Israelis recognize the Jordanian role on the Temple Mount and so I think the Jordanians are very concerned about the consequences for Jerusalem as well.

PITA: All right, Tamara, thanks for explaining this to us.

WITTES: Thanks for having me.