

The Deal of the Century's Audacious Bets

» by Michael J. Koplow

Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt

BEFORE ISRAELI ELECTIONS! AFTER Israeli elections but before the government is formed! Right after Ramadan! As soon as Shavuot ends!

The latest twist in the unveiling of President Donald Trump's peace initiative is that it will kick off with a workshop in Bahrain at the end of June, focusing on "an ambitious, achievable vision and framework for a prosperous future for the Palestinian people and the region, including enhancements to economic governance, development of human capital, and facilitation of rapid private-sector growth."

This announcement confirmed the long-held suspicions of many analysts and observers that the Trump administration is focusing on economic peace, and temporarily shelving whatever political component its initiative contains.

Many (myself included) mocked the announcement that the administration's opening salvo is to convene finance ministers and businessmen to talk about the future of the Palestinian economy without including any representatives from the putative Palestinian government. The same administration that froze all funding to development and civil society projects in the West Bank now is going to ask others to contribute to development and civil society projects in the West Bank.

However, it's worth laying out precisely what the members of the Trump administration seem to be aiming for with this plan, what it is they are betting on, and why those bets are far more weighted in the other direction than they want to allow.

For starters, the White House is betting economics overrides politics. From consistent refusals to be pinned down on what type of arrangement Jared Kushner, Jason Greenblatt and David Friedman envision, to Kushner's focus in public comments on improving the daily lives of Palestinians, it is evident the Trump team hopes enough money can solve anything,

The theory behind the Bahrain gathering is to demonstrate to Palestinians just how much they potentially are giving up by not engaging, and that their insistence on focusing on political issues is going to cost them economically.

This is the other side of the coin of the Trump policy toward the Palestinians: to punish them financially through all cessation of aid and development projects so as to raise the costs of their alleged intransigence and make them yield. That policy has not paid dividends so far, largely because the Palestinian national project is about nationalism rather than quality of life; thus, it cannot so easily be bought off — but the White House is intent



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on doubling down on this particular bet.

Next, the administration is betting it can separate the Palestinian people from the Palestinian leadership by inciting grass-roots anger at the Palestinian Authority (PA) for not engaging in the peace plan. The logic behind this is to pressure the PA to concede the point and deal with the Trump plan, or perhaps in the Trump administration's wildest dreams, lead to an uprising that will overthrow Mahmoud Abbas and the current leadership. Trying to get Palestinians excited about the PA is one way of making sense out of Greenblatt's Twitter feed, which is an almost nonstop screed against the Palestinian leadership and its hostility toward the Trump administration's efforts

to improve Palestinian quality of life in the West Bank.

One also might read something into the invites to the Bahrain workshop. They were sent to a group of Palestinian businessmen Greenblatt has been promoting on Twitter. Perhaps this is the stirring of an effort to promote an alternative Palestinian leadership. The notion that the U.S. can engineer a grass-roots uprising — particularly given the Trump administration's absolute toxicity these days among Palestinians — is farcical. The entire pursuit is reminiscent of the Ahmed Chalabi gambit for Iraq that the George W. Bush White House cooked up before the invasion of Iraq. Nevertheless, the Trump

team obviously is not only trying to isolate Abbas but also challenge his authority.

The White House also is betting Arab states will play along with the Trump plan and will commit to investing in specific projects in the Palestinian territories, or even donate piles of aid — on nothing but blind faith, despite having no insight into what the statuses of those territories will be or what political system will exist in the West Bank. Will it be an independent Palestinian state in 96% of the West Bank? Will it be an autonomous enclave in 40% of it? Will it be integrated entirely into Israel and under direct Israeli control? There are no answers to these questions because the Trump administration has neither advanced a vision of statehood

nor committed to releasing any part of the political framework before asking countries to commit billions of dollars to a black hole.

As Senior Fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution Tamara Wittes so aptly put it, "Releasing an economic vision for government 'investors' without specifying the political structures that support it is like selling apartments in a skyscraper for which there are as yet no architectural plans."

My prediction is that states attending the workshop will end up showering the Trump effort with some platitudes and a bunch of empty commitments that are never fulfilled.

Finally, the administration is betting it can accomplish this entire enterprise while ignoring the split between the West Bank and Gaza, whether its goal is nothing more than economic peace or advances down the road to a tangible political agenda. For years, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government and its allies argued that no progress toward a permanent status agreement was possible without Palestinian reconciliation — a point that absolutely has merit. Now, the Trump team is trying to do exactly that without any prior effort to prod Fatah and Hamas to reconcile or to return the Palestinian Authority to Gaza. This suggests either a supremely naïve hubris, or that furthering the West Bank-Gaza split rather than mending it is the real point.

Prime Minister Netanyahu purposely has tried to keep the West Bank and Gaza separate to avoid having to deal with any serious diplomatic overtures. An initiative aimed at improving the West Bank economy without addressing how to integrate the West Bank and Gaza, or really addressing the political issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at all, is straight out of his wildest dreams.

None of this is to say that the Trump administration won't claim victory after the workshop is over. Israeli officials will attend alongside Arab officials in an Arab country, grandiose pledges will be made and even more grandiose words spoken of the untapped potential within the Palestinians' grasp if they would stop being so stubborn and insisting on a viable sovereign state; the Kushner team will declare its vision and approach vindicated.

Although it will not bring the two parties any closer to an agreement, it will give Israelis more ammunition to argue that the Palestinians never will agree to anything put forward by anyone, and strengthen the voices inside Israel calling for unilateral moves that will upend the entire Israeli-Palestinian dynamic for good. And rather than bringing the two sides to peace, perhaps that is the ultimate point of this entire endeavor. ■

Michael J. Koplow is Israel Policy Forum's policy director, based in Washington, D.C. He can be reached at mkoplow@ipforum.org.