

COMMENTARY

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Trump:

“Close the Open Hand out of Love”

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President-elect Trump’s appointment of David Friedman (known for his support of the settlements) to be the US ambassador to Israel, his appointment of Walid Phares (a Maronite Christian known for his pro-Israel track record and distaste for the Palestinians) as his Middle East advisor, and charging his son-in-law Jared Kushner (who is a staunch supporter of Israel and was recently appointed as Senior Advisor to the President), to take the lead in the search for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, all suggest there could be a major change in US policy toward the conflict.

These appointments, coupled with Trump’s campaign promise to relocate the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, may well translate to unfettered support for settlements and the annexation of more Palestinian territory. Should this come to pass, it will jeopardize the prospect of a two-state solution and the future of Israel as a viable Jewish state, not to mention the endless violence that would ensue.

We are already hearing the alarm bells from various Arab capitals. The victory of the Palestinians on the passage of UN Resolution 2334 that condemns the Israeli settlements has now been overshadowed by a sense of deep trepidation, while stirring major concerns among moderate Israelis and Europeans who don’t know what to expect and how troublesome the situation may become.

Many members of the Israeli government feel emboldened by these developments. Education Minister Naftali Bennett has called for the annexation of the third largest settlement Ma’ale Adumim, a few minutes’ drive from East Jerusalem, which would virtually cut the West Bank in

half and prevent the rise of a viable and contiguous Palestinian state. He further implored Netanyahu to rule out the establishment of a Palestinian state during his first meeting with President Trump, stating, “The next few weeks present a unique window of opportunity for Israel.”

For Netanyahu, Trump as president is simply heaven-sent. He believes that even though he will not succeed in convincing Trump to shred the Iran deal because of the international repercussions, which Trump cannot dismiss, the Trump administration will leave him to his own devices to expand the settlements and gradually render the prospect of a Palestinian state unfeasible by creating irreversible facts on the ground.

The irony here is that many of those who claim to care about Israel’s future security and wellbeing do not want to acknowledge that the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are not a fading phenomenon. Yes, Israel can build another 100 settlements and annex much of the West Bank, but what then? Will the Palestinians, the Arab world, and the international community simply sit on their hands and do nothing?

Those unflinching supporters of Israel should be true to themselves and answer—where will Israel be in 10 or 15 years? Will it be a Jewish state? A democratic state? An apartheid state? A bi-national state? What legal system will be in place to govern the West Bank? Will it be civilian or military? Will there be two different laws, one for the Palestinians and one for the settlers?

What is the vision of the detractors who oppose the creation of a Palestinian state about the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians? What does Netanyahu mean when he repeatedly invokes the Jews’ claim to the entire “land of Israel?” Does Bennett have any clue what will happen following the annexation of Ma’ale Adumim, or the annexation of Area C which represents 61 per cent of the West Bank?

What will be the reaction of the Arab states? Can Netanyahu count on their cooperation during the next Palestinian uprising, which is bound to erupt once their hope for a state is dashed completely? What will be the outcome of the next Gaza war, and what will be the extent of the collateral damage?

Yes, Israel can reoccupy Gaza and decapitate Hamas’ leaders (as Israel’s Defence Minister Lieberman recently retorted), but is Israel willing to govern over 1.8 million Palestinians? At what cost, in both blood and treasure? If not, what happens when the next round of rockets rains down daily, terrifying every Israeli?

Can Israeli technology and anti-terror capabilities that Netanyahu boasts about bring peace? How, one might ask? Will the Arab states simply forget about the Palestinians’ plight only

because they are currently collaborating with Israel on matters of security and intelligence sharing to lessen Iranian threats?

Finally, have Netanyahu, Bennett, and their like considered the international outcry, condemnation, and sanctions that would ensue, and how isolated Israel will be? Have they thought about what Jews around the world would be subjected to? Anti-Semitism will intensify and Jewish businesses and organisations will be seen as ‘fair targets’ for terrorism.

The young generation of Jews will be further alienated, whose immigration to Israel is already in decline. They will no longer view Israel as a safe haven for Jews but as a major liability, and do not want to enlist in the IDF and be assigned to oppress the Palestinians and deny them the right to be free.

What many Israeli madmen and women in and out of the government (like Netanyahu, Bennett, Lieberman, Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, Culture Minister Miri Regev, and their cohorts) refuse to realize is that they can manipulate, manoeuvre, manage, or mar the Palestinians only up to a point—but they cannot control them indefinitely. Netanyahu in particular skilfully uses fear tactics and takes advantage of Palestinian incitement to justify his claim that they are not interested in peace.

Their most blatant lie is the contention that once Israel evacuates the West Bank, the territories will become just another Gaza (a ‘Hamastan’), a launching pad for rockets and terrorism, when in fact the withdrawal from Gaza was unilateral without any coordination with the Palestinian Authority in charge of Gaza at the time.

The economic dependency of the Palestinians in the West Bank on Israel, and security cooperation will not end once there is a peace agreement. Israel is and will remain the economic lifeline for the Palestinians for decades. The Palestinians seek political independence but they cannot (nor do they want to) simply divorce themselves from Israel completely because of these ties. They know about Egypt and Jordan’s extensive collaboration with Israel in these areas and how much they benefit from having peace with Israel.

I do not, however, exempt the Palestinians for one moment from responsibility. It is time they stop living in the past; violence and incitement against Israel will do nothing but deprive them of the very thing they want to achieve—a state of their own. They must be prepared to pay the price for wanting to be free.

They must learn how to shoulder their responsibility, clean up their corrupt political system, and focus on building the infrastructure and institutions of a state. Above all, they must stop poisoning the next generation of Palestinians against Israel, as doing so only victimizes these young boys and girls and deprives them of a better and more promising future.

Before Friedman, Phares, and Kushner advise the president on how to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they must answer all of these questions which have major bearing on Israel's very future. I absolutely believe they all genuinely care about Israel and want to do everything they can to ensure its security and prosperity, at peace with its neighbours. But here is where tough love is needed. As Nietzsche succinctly put it, "This is the hardest of all: to close the open hand out of love, and keep modest as a giver."

This is precisely the point. Because of their commitment to Israel's wellbeing, they must carefully think about the ramifications if they recommend to the president to fulfil his campaign promise to relocate the US embassy to Jerusalem without simultaneously acknowledging the right of the Palestinians to establish their own capital in East Jerusalem once a peace agreement, is achieved.

They must warily consider the implications if Israel were to annex Ma'ale Adumim without agreed-upon land swaps while ensuring a future Palestinian state maintains land contiguity. They must be extraordinarily cautious not to give Netanyahu a blank check to expand the settlements, and scuttle the two-state solution and put Israel's future in peril.

As a dealmaker, Trump knows that no unilateral action by one party can seal a deal. An agreement between Israel and the Palestinians must be equitable—a non-zero sum approach that answers to the aspirations of both people, especially because they have no choice but to coexist. Their destiny, like it or not, is intertwined—either they live in peace and harmony, or in perpetual violence, death, and destruction. Neither can have it their way only.

Here is where you, Trump, can play a historic role. As a deal maker, I implore you, do not give Netanyahu what he wants. If you do, you will rob the vast majority of Israelis and Palestinians of everything they aspire for and set in motion an unrelenting cycle of violence that will spare neither side decades of more pain, agony, death, and destruction. A good and sustainable deal requires give and take; each side must make the necessary concessions and create a mutuality of vested interests to ensure its durability.

Kushner is the least zealous; he knows the Israeli scene well and understands that anything short of even-handed peace will be to Israel's detriment. We can only hope that he will use his influence as a senior advisor and pave the way for President Trump to make the deal that all of his predecessors failed to achieve.

As the visionary David Ben-Gurion, who was the leading founder of the state of Israel and its first Prime Minister, put it, "Better a Jewish state on part of the land than all of the land without a state."

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://alonben-meir.com/writing/trump-close-open-hand-love/>

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