**The charade of a peace plan**

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On January 22, 2020, forty kings, prime ministers, presidents of the world’s most powerful nationsgathered in Jerusalem to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, where over a million people, mostly Jews, were murdered by the Nazis. The holocaust in which six million European Jews were exterminated by Germans is recognized as one of the most horrific tragedies in the annals of history.

It is ironic, however, thatthe historic sufferings of theJewish peopledo not make the Israelismore sensitive to the plight of the Palestinians under their occupation. Only a week following the ceremony in Jerusalem, the prime minister of Israel and the president of the US unveiled a long-awaited Middle East peace plan. Hailed as the “deal of the century,” the plan was presented with great fanfare to a group ofcarefully selected guestsin the gilded East Room of the White House. Among the guests were Evangelical Christians, Zionist Jews, and the ambassadors of the United Arab Emirate, Bahrain and Oman, but no Palestinians. The timing of the release of the peace plan was alsosignificant.One of the twoprincipal protagonists, the US president, Donald Trump, had been impeached by the Congress and at the time was being tried in the Senate, while the Israeli leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, has been criminally indicted for corruption and will soon face trial, prompting some observers to comment that it was a political theatre to help the two leaders. The eighty-page peace plan repudiatesdecades-old US policies, espoused by previous presidents, and is contrary to various United Nations resolutions supporting two independent states, one Jewish, the other Palestinian. The new US plan granted Israel virtually everything it had been asking for over the years. All the settlements established illegally by Israel on confiscated Palestinian lands as well as the entire Jordon valley will be awarded to Israel, severing all connections with Jordan. Jerusalem will remain the undivided capital of Israel, butto mollify the Palestinians, the outskirtsof East Jerusalem will be renamed, Al Quds, and given to them to establish their capital. Yes, there will be a Palestinian state, but bereft of all trappings of a state–no defined borders, no airport, and no security forces. Seventy percent of the West Bank, comprising a patchwork of enclaves, surrounded by Israeli settlements and connected by tunnels and bridges, will be called the Palestinian state. The framework is reminiscent of Bantustan that the white South African government had envisaged for the black majority.Even before this travesty can happen, the Palestinianswill have to subdue acts of terrorism, disband Hamas and recognize Israel’s sovereignty over some 90 percent of historic Palestine.Palestinian refugees will be allowed to return not to their former hometowns in Israel but to the mini-Palestinian state.

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At the end of four years, Israel alone will determine whether the Palestinians have met these stringent requirements. Unlike the Palestinians, Israel in not required to meet any conditions. If all conditions are met, the Palestinians would be rewarded with a donation of $50 billion, raised by an international consortium, mostly the rich Arab countries.

The peace plan was constructed primarly by Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, an orthodox Jew who is a friend of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Salman, and the American ambassador David Friedman, an ardent supporter of Israel settlements, in consultation with BenjaminNetanyahu, prime minister of Israel. President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority emphatically rejects this plan. It has alsobeen criticized by all the Democraticcandidates seeking their party’s nomination forthe presidency for itsbiased nature. Many liberal Jewish organization in this country have also opposed it as they see it as ultimately detrimental to Israel. The twomost importantUS newspapers, The New York Times and The Washington Post, have written highly critical editorials, giving the plan little chance of success.The Times, in its editorial, commented; “From all appearances, the deal of the century, as it is touted, seemed nothing more than a cynical attempt at diversion by two politicians in trouble, a sop to their right-wing bases as each leader vies for reelection.”

How did the Palestinians get into this hapless, bedraggled state, with few viable options left for them to achieve independence? Foremost, there is huge disparity between the might and resources of Israel, which has evolved into a regional superpower, with a living standard rivalling that of Western Europe, while the Palestinian state is impoverished andmoribund, living mostly on UN dole outs. There have been no elections since January 2005 when President Abbas was elected. He is old and in failing health, but no younger leadership has been permitted to emerge. The Gaza strip, beset by an inhumane siege enforced by Israel and Egypt, has become a large human prison, with high unemployment andabject misery, exacerbated bythe rule by Hamas, a conservative, extremist religious Party.

On top of all other problems, the Arab governments, headed by dictators and autocratic rulers, have lost interest in the Palestinian problem, and are far more concerned with Iran and established informal alliance with Israel to counter the Irani threat as they perceive it.There has been no major opposition to the Trump Peace Plan from most Arab countries. As reported by The New York Times, the UAE ambassador to Washington, Yousef Otaiba, called the plan ‘a serious initiative that addresses many issues raised over the years.” Saudi Arabia’s foreign ministry issued a subdued statement expressing “its appreciation of the efforts of President Trump to develop a comprehensive peace plan.” The government of Jordan was the only exception as it issued a strong condemnation of the plan, reiterating its support for the two-state solution, based on 1967 borders. Later, the foreign ministers of the Arab League unanimously rejected the peace plan. Under the current alignment of world powers, the dream of a Palestinian state is likely to remain a mirage. However, the pace of dispossession of the Palestinians may be slowed or reversed if President Trump is replaced in the coming elections by a new president willing to adopt a more balanced and even-handed approach towards them.

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