

ARGUMENT

The Oslo Accords Are Dead. Should the Palestinian Authority Live On?

Trump's peace plan killed any hope of a negotiated settlement. Rather than empty rhetoric, Palestinian leaders owe their people a new approach—even if it means disbanding the PA.

BY [TAREQ BACONI](#)

| FEBRUARY 18, 2020, 9:03 AM



Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas speaks during a meeting with journalists in the Palestinian Authority headquarters in Ramallah on July 3, 2019. ABBAS MOMANI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Palestinians “never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.”

The statement, [first uttered](#) by the Israeli politician and diplomat Abba Eban nearly 50 years ago, has become a trope that collectively paints the Palestinian people as rejectionists who are unwilling to make compromises for peace.

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On Jan. 28, in an interview on CNN, Jared Kushner, U.S. President Donald Trump’s son-in-law and Middle East advisor, [stated](#) that the Palestinians “have a perfect track record of blowing every opportunity they’ve had in their past. But perhaps maybe their leadership will read the details of [the Trump plan], stop posturing, and do what’s best to try to make the Palestinians’ lives better.”

Some Palestinians might heed Kushner’s advice, just not in the way he hopes.

The Trump plan, titled “Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People,” does indeed offer the Palestinian leadership an opportunity to stop posturing and begin asking, and answering, difficult questions.

Now that the current U.S. administration and successive Israeli governments have explicitly discarded the Oslo Accords, should the Palestinian leadership also abandon that agreement?

The most obvious is whether, now that the current U.S. administration and successive Israeli governments have explicitly discarded the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian leadership should also abandon that agreement, rather than

risk becoming the midwife for further Israeli annexation of Palestinian territories.

Many Palestinians would answer in the affirmative and quickly explain why: A consequence of the Oslo Accords is that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the internationally recognized sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, has been subsumed into the Palestinian Authority (PA), effectively subordinating the PLO's liberation agenda to the PA's governance responsibilities.

Established in 1994, following the signing of the Oslo Accords, the PA was envisioned, at least by some Palestinians, to be their state-in-waiting, even though the Oslo Accords made no mention of Palestinian statehood.

The PA's state-building agenda established sprawling public institutions that employ more than 150,000 Palestinians. Grand buildings like the Muqata have altered Ramallah's cityscape and made the once-tranquil city the urban center of the West Bank. As of 2013, the words "State of Palestine" adorn all official insignia. Alongside such performances of statehood, a neoliberal economic agenda enhanced the quality of life for a certain subset of Palestinians, even while burdening them with mortgage debts and car loans.

Most importantly, the PA monopolized the use of arms in the West Bank and, under the Basic Law, declared that the function of the Palestinian security forces would be "limited to defending the country, serving the people." Yet at the same time, the PA entered into expansive security coordination agreements with Israel. Those were premised on the notion that if the PA could safeguard the security of Israeli civilians and stabilize the territories, Israel would withdraw from territories that, under an agreed two-state solution, would form part of the Palestinian state.

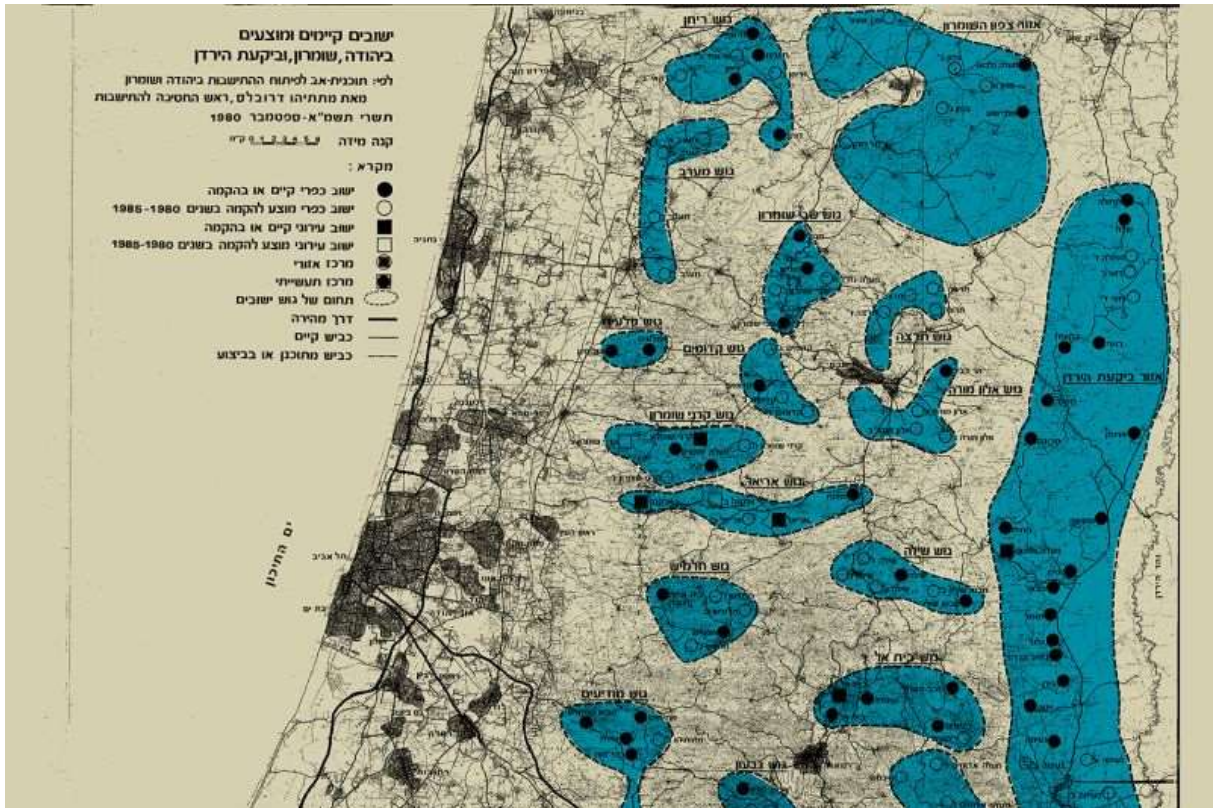
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Trump's "realistic two-state solution" offers a vision of statehood that deviates substantially from that premise. The European Union, the Arab League, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation have criticized Trump's plan for breaking with the U.N. resolutions and international legal principles that have underpinned the two-state solution. Yet, as with past peace initiatives, there is little indication that sufficient political will can be rallied, locally or internationally, to stop, let alone reverse, the slow erosion of Palestinian sovereignty enshrined in each subsequent peace proposal.

For many Palestinians, the Trump plan has already been implemented on the ground and is merely being formalized on paper.

Palestinians have reacted to the plan either with a sense of apprehension, understanding it as the blueprint that future Israeli governments will

implicitly or explicitly follow, or with resignation, seeing it as the description of present reality—a plan that has already been implemented on the ground and is merely being formalized on paper.

Presented with this Swiss cheese map of how the present U.S. and Israeli governments imagine Palestinian statehood, as Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas referred to it at the United Nations, his PA will be hard-pressed to show how its state-building agenda of the past 26 years has set the foundation for the state Palestinians desire rather than creating a set of nonsovereign, territorially disconnected Bantustans.

Instead of buying into the facade of statehood, many Palestinians see the PA simply as an extension of Israel's occupation, like the Indian viceroy—a governing authority that pacifies indigenous populations on behalf of colonial regimes.

Security coordination sits at the heart of this grievance. Consuming a disproportionate amount of the PA's public expenditure, security coordination has repeatedly been hailed by Abbas as "sacred." But many Palestinians see security coordination as underpinning both the occupation and the PA's [unpopular rule](#), rather than protecting them or paving the way for Israeli withdrawal.

A common refrain heard in Ramallah is that when the PA police scurry into their hideouts, that's when one knows the Israeli army is about to come into Palestinian cities. The PA uses security coordination to outsource its repressive tactics to Israeli security agents or to crack down on opponents of its rule, whether from Hamas or local activists.

A Human Rights Watch report [published in 2018](#) detailed how the PA relies on extensive torture and imprisonment tactics in the West Bank. I recall a sobering conversation with a young Palestinian teenager in a refugee camp in the West Bank. Sweating heavily and seemingly unable to control his nerves, he explained to me that he would choose an Israeli prison over a PA one anytime, given the brutality of the torture under Palestinian security officers.

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and sustain the PA as a corrupt police pseudo-state.

Little surprise then, that, according to the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, [84 percent](#) of Palestinians favor withdrawing Palestinian recognition of Israel, 77 percent call for ending security coordination with Israel, and 69 percent call for ending the implementation of the Oslo Accords.

It's therefore clear that many Palestinians view the PA's dismantlement as a prerequisite for Palestinians to secure their freedom and rights, whether in one state or two. Those who continue to view the PA as a state-in-the-making, including many PLO leaders, reject this view, however. They argue that the PA, and the institutions of state it has built, must be reformed to resist the occupation rather than continue to operate within it. Their rationale is shaped, among other concerns, by a fear of what a void where the PA once stood might mean, in terms of soaring unemployment and crippled public services, including schools and hospitals.

These are not idle concerns, and any advocate of dismantling the PA must come up with adequate answers. At the same time, it seems unrealistic to assume the PA can reform itself to resist further Israeli settlement and annexation of the West Bank or to reclaim sovereignty. The PA's very structures have been designed and have evolved to stabilize, rather than disrupt, Palestinian lives under occupation. And its ability to govern is premised precisely on its acquiescence to Israeli constraints.

In recent months, for instance, Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh has been attempting to reclaim sovereignty by reducing economic dependence on Israel and seeking other trade partners, such as Jordan and Egypt. Most recently, Shtayyeh limited the import of cattle from Israel into the West Bank. These policies have demonstrated their power: Israeli ranchers [mobilized](#) against their government, demanding retribution. However, [in retaliation](#), Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennett made clear that the PA lacked any economic autonomy, preventing Palestinian agricultural exports to Israel or elsewhere, effectively initiating an economic siege on the West Bank.

Such policies on the part of the PA, often reactive and ad hoc, are unlikely to yield substantive results. Shtayyeh's trajectory, while well intentioned, was hastily implemented, without the requisite infrastructure that would allow for its success. Israeli reprisals were to be expected. As a Palestinian

economist asked during an interview with me, what were the measures taken by the PA to protect Palestinian farmers from the backlash? The First Intifada, when Palestinians refused to cooperate with the occupation, offers useful lessons, including in its shift toward localized economies, whether in agriculture or manufacturing, that mitigated exposure to Israeli punitive measures.

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With the Trump plan, there is an opportunity again for the Palestinian leadership to embrace an alternative path. Whether Palestinians are calling for a dismantlement of the PA or its reform into a body that can challenge the occupation, most agree that the PA in its current format is not conducive to securing Palestinians' rights. As a senior PLO member told me recently, "Abbas now is an authority without authority, allowing for an occupation without a cost."

So far, PA leaders have doubled down on old strategies in response to Trump's pro-annexation plan and reacted in a haphazard manner: Abbas called for the suspension of the Oslo Accords, for a halt to security coordination, and for the PA's disengagement from the occupation. Yet these statements were not accompanied by any indication that they were seriously considered, let alone about to be implemented. Polls have indicated that more than [70 percent](#) of Palestinians no longer believe such promises.

The PLO's efforts to circulate drafts opposing Trump's plan to the U.N. Security Council are viewed by the leadership as an important way of rallying international opposition to Israel's future annexation of Palestinian lands and reaffirming international commitments to the two-state solution. They believe that the international community can act as a bulwark against current Israeli-American efforts to undermine future prospects for Palestinian statehood. Yet despite heavy diplomatic lobbying, the Palestinians were unable to gather the support they deemed necessary at the U.N. Their failure is one more indication that the rules of the game have changed.

So far there is no indication from the Palestinian leadership—beyond rhetoric—that additional measures are being considered. But assuming that their current efforts are sufficient is a mistake, as is defining a future red line. Regardless of whether the Israeli government annexes Palestinian lands before the March 2 elections or after, at what pace, or at all, the Palestinian leadership must act with the facts on the ground

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: The historical trajectory points to the entrenchment of a one-state reality. And at present there is no indication that local or international players will actively intervene to reverse this trajectory.

Therefore, the PA leadership should develop a comprehensive political strategy to address the fact that the Oslo Accords have been emptied of all content. They could still indicate a preference and readiness for negotiations along internationally agreed parameters. But that does not absolve them of the need or responsibility to develop a serious and calculated response to the reality in which they now find themselves.

This initiative could have two parts.

The first would be the resuscitation of the institutions of the PLO through carrying out elections for the Palestinian National Council. This is more pressing than pursuing Palestinian legislative elections, which would essentially legitimize the PA and reinforce the present reality.

The second is to seriously consider, rather than hastily repeat, what disengagement might look like, whether this entails suspending recognition of Israel, ending security coordination, or dismantling the PA—all of which are demands made by a majority of Palestinians. The leadership ought to assess whether, and if so how, the PA might be dismantled or restructured to extricate Palestinians from the current reality of state-building under occupation and allow them to reclaim sovereignty and resist further Israeli encroachment.

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Almost every Palestinian leader to whom I've spoken in the past few years has stressed the need to build Palestinian resilience in the face of the existential threats they are facing. Such rhetoric has more often than not been used as an excuse for inaction.

But to effectively build resilience, the PA leadership must now answer difficult questions instead of merely repeating the threat of disengagement. How would they provide for the 150,000 employees who now depend on PA salaries? How will public hospitals and schools in the West Bank run without the PA? What kinds of social and economic plans can be put in place to mitigate financial reprisals from Israel? How can Palestinians be protected when the Israeli army redeploys into the territories? What kind of local agricultural and production capacity can be developed to sustain people's lives in the absence of their ability to import and export? And can the PA adopt progressive taxation to redistribute wealth and reduce dependency on foreign aid and Israeli withholding of collected taxes?

Palestinians on the ground will bear the brunt of any policy shift, and they deserve more than empty rhetoric and reactive gestures. It might be fanciful to think that the PA leadership will disrupt a system that has furthered its own self-interest. But the PA's collapse is now a real possibility—whether caused by [Palestinian revolts](#) or [Israeli initiatives](#). This is an opportunity for the PA leadership to reclaim its agency, assume responsibility, and explore what strategically disentangling itself from the Oslo Accords might look like beyond empty threats.

They should seize the moment.