



PERSPECTIVES

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The Bahrain Conference: Nothing New Under the Sun

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: “Peace to Prosperity” is certainly an ambitious title for the Bahrain Conference, which offers an “out of the box” plan to handle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The US vision essentially turns the “refugees” from liabilities into assets, thereby taking the refugee issue off the table. This concept has an historic precedent: the resettlement initiative presented by UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold on June 15, 1959. Both plans received the same response from Palestinians: angry dismissal.

At the Bahrain Conference, Jared Kushner unveiled the administration’s “Deal of the Century.” The sentiment about this plan among the Arab states, as well as among the Palestinians themselves, was gloomy. Their main objection is what the plan leaves out: it offers an economic vision but postpones the political issues at the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The new plan, entitled “[Peace to Prosperity](#),” describes itself as a vision “to empower the Palestinian people,” and aims at unleashing the territories’ economic potential and enhancing their governance. It would create a \$50 billion global investment fund to lift the Palestinian and neighboring Arab states’ economies, including a \$5 billion transportation corridor to connect the West Bank and Gaza.

“Peace to Prosperity” is an ambitious title for an “out of the box” initiative designed to pave the way for a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It aims to essentially remove the long-troublesome Palestinian refugee issue from the table and turn the “refugees” from liabilities into assets.

The Bahrain Conference can also be viewed as a practical mechanism by which to deprive UNRWA of its role. That agency is considered by Washington to be a tool that perpetuates, rather than mitigates, the “refugee problem.”

The US initiative intends to spend more than half the allotted \$50 billion in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; the rest is to be split among Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan. This could be interpreted as a message to those countries to resettle the Palestinian “refugees.” (Syria is of course excluded. Egypt is included as a potential destination for the “refugees” living in the Gaza Strip).

The Trump administration is pursuing the goal of changing the Palestinian experience from a society of miserable “refugees” into a prosperous society. It is not surprising that this approach is not finding favor among decision-makers in the Palestinian Authority.

Kushner’s concept has an historic precedent. On June 15, 1959, UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold presented a resettlement initiative (UN General Assembly document no. A/4121). Hammarskjold assumed there were means available for the absorption of the refugees into the economy of the Arab region, and asserted that the refugees would be beneficial to their host countries by providing the manpower necessary to those countries’ development. He proposed that the program be financed by oil revenues and international funds up to \$2 billion:

In these circumstances, it is realistic to assume that the reintegration of the refugees in the Near East would have to run parallel to an increase in the national income at least proportional to the number reintegrated...Viewed from an economic angle, the reintegration of the Palestine refugees into productive life, although it must be considered as a fairly long process, is perfectly within reach provided that the area can be developed through sufficient capital formation.

The economic development which has been presented here as necessary to an integration of the refugees requires that we overcome various political difficulties which now hamper progress in the desirable direction. One of them is the Palestine problem in its various aspects; another one the problem of inter-Arab relationships; a third one the problem of an Arab economic co-operation so framed as to render possible the exploitation of the natural resources of the area to the full benefit of all the countries in the area.

The Hammarskjold and Kushner plans are similar not only in their intentions but in the responses they elicited. In both cases, critics claimed that the plan in

question overlooked the national rights of the Palestinians and disadvantaged them by tackling regional economic development first. Putting economic cooperation with Israel ahead of political cooperation is deemed unacceptable, no matter what benefits might accrue to the Palestinian people.

In 1959, it was claimed that Arab acceptance of the UN Secretary General's plan, with no guarantees, would have been tantamount to giving up their economic and political rights. The Arabs accused Hammarskjold of exceeding his legal limits, and faulted him for ignoring the fact that the economic issues were the result of the political conflict. Addressing the economic question also separated the refugee problem from the conflict as a whole, which, so it was argued, was one of nationhood.

On August 17, 1959, the Arab League issued a statement asserting that it:

affirms the rejection, by the Arab Governments and their peoples, as well as the rejection by the Palestine Arabs, of resettlement in any form, as well as of any plan that aims, directly or indirectly, at the settlement of the refugees outside their country. The Arab States emphasize their adherence and the adherence of the Arab people of Palestine to (their) demand for repatriation.

Further, they firmly denounced the plan's logic, claiming:

...the questions of economic development inherently pertain to the sovereignty of the Arab States, and...they have no relation whatever to the problem of the refugees and their future. The Committee regrets that the Secretary-General (of the UN) has raised this problem and linked it to the question of the refugees.

There is nothing new under the sun. Both initiatives were greeted by harsh demonstrations. On June 24, 2019, it was reported that "Palestinians burned portraits of President Donald Trump as they protested in both the Gaza Strip and the Israeli-occupied West Bank on Monday against US-led plans for a conference on their economy in Bahrain."

In 1959, while visiting the Middle East, Hammarskjold was met by an angry mob of thousands of Arab refugees at a camp in Jordan and was forced to beat a hasty retreat. Upon his arrival, he was read a petition by Muhammad Said, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood group in the camp, declaring that the refugees demanded repatriation and would accept no alternative. The petition threatened a "peace march" into Israel to recover the lands and homes left behind in 1948.

There is, however, an important difference: Saudi Arabia's moderate position on the Kushner initiative, which could suggest that the Kingdom is behind it. In 1959, it was the Saudi ambassador to the UN (and future PLO chairman), Ahmad Shukeiry, who categorically rejected the Hammarskjold plan for economic integration of the Arab refugees into the economies of the Middle East. He called the idea of economic integration of the refugees "irrelevant and inadmissible." The Arab economy, he contended, "is the sole concern of the Arab states," and those states will "tolerate no interference in their affairs, economic, political or otherwise." He warned that unless Israel was forced at that year's session (1959) to accept complete repatriation of the refugees, 80,000,000 Arabs "from Casablanca to the Persian Gulf" were ready and eager to go to war with the Jewish State.

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