



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# A Historic Opportunity That Must Be Seized

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Regardless of the ambiguities and open questions attending President Trump's "Deal of the Century," Israel clearly stands at a historic juncture and must decide what to make of this one-time opportunity. About such moments it is said: "There are those who gain the world in a single moment and there are those who lose the world in a single moment."

On May 14, 1948, a few hours before the declaration of Israel's establishment, Chaim Weizmann, soon to become the Jewish State's first president, sent an urgent telegram from Geneva: "The decision must be made immediately. The gates of heaven have opened for a moment, and if we enter them our state will be established; if not, who knows if we will see its establishment in our day if at all." At such moments, leaders and policymakers must make fateful decisions. Those who procrastinate and wait for detailed staff assessments risk squandering the opportunity.

From its inception, the Zionist enterprise has existed in constant tension between two contending visions regarding the overriding goal of the prospective Jewish state: redemption and reconstitution of statehood in the ancestral homeland versus an internationally recognized safe haven for persecuted Jews. And while Israel has largely succeeded at reconciling these two visions and creating a broad common denominator for a unified national endeavor, the yawning gap between the approaches reveals itself all over again at every fateful juncture.

We now see the two visions once more in confrontation: on the one hand, the desire to retain the Jordan Valley for security reasons only; on the other, the aim of applying full sovereignty to this tract of land and settling it accordingly.

The shift President Trump has brought about in the American approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict touches the very heart of the Israeli controversy and presents a unique historic opportunity.

In the decades attending the formation of the US-Israel alliance in the late 1960s, successive US administrations have expressed a commitment to Israel's security but denied its claim to the parts of the homeland that were captured in the 1967 war.

By way of imposing a solution on the Israeli government, President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry tasked Gen. John Allen with crafting a security plan that would allay Israel's security concerns about an almost total withdrawal from the West Bank, including the Jordan Valley, and require it to "choose between peace and ideology" (as columnist Thomas Friedman put it in the *New York Times*). With this plan the administration sought to fulfill its commitment to Israel's security while rejecting its demand for defensible borders that do not conform to the 1967 lines (a demand consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 242 of November 1967).

The greatness of the Trump plan lies in the fact that unlike preceding American peace initiatives, it recognizes Israel's right to retain territories beyond the 1967 lines as a matter of historical right and not solely as a measure to be taken for security purposes.

Though the plan does not grant Israel all it desires, it plainly repudiates the precedent established by the peace treaty with Egypt, which mandated a complete Israeli withdrawal to the last centimeter. It was this precedent that led then-PM Ehud Barak (at the Camp David summit in July 2000) to offer full Israeli territorial swaps for the settlement blocs that would remain in its hands (comprising about 3% of West Bank territory).

With his plan, President Trump joins Lord Balfour and other world leaders who saw in Israel's rebirth in its ancestral homeland the tidings of a cosmic redemption, not just the provision of a haven to a persecuted people. Israel has received a precious gift, and it must decide what to make of the potential it harbors. About such moments it is said: "There are those who gain the world in a single moment and there are those who lose the world in a single moment."

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