



PERSPECTIVES

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Democrats, Experts, and Peace Plans

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Trump “Deal of the Century” has elicited responses ranging from enthusiastic support to bitter rejection. Among those rejecting the plan are US Democratic candidates for president. Their instant and total rejection reflects an instinctive antipathy toward Trump but also an addiction to expert-driven processes that have failed for decades. The blanket rejection reflects non-zero sum conceptions in which there can be no winners or losers in the conflict, and reveals an instrumental view of Palestinians as stalking horses for other causes. But reality is creeping in and starting to change attitudes.

Cutting Gordian Knots is a signature of the Trump administration, and the long-rumored “[Deal of the Century](#)” is no exception. At its core, the plan explicitly acknowledges reality: the Palestinians are losing the conflict, Israel will not return to the 1949 armistice lines, there will be no evacuation of the settlement blocs, and there is no Palestinian “right of return.”

As historian [Martin Kramer](#) points out, the plan is not so much about peace as about partition. In that sense, the break it represents from the past 50 years of “peace processing” is profound. Equally striking is the plan’s reception. For all its vagaries, only a small handful of countries and entities, namely the Palestinian Authority (PA), Turkey, and Iran, have spoken out bitterly against it, with the [Arab League](#) predictably (yett hesitatingly) following suit. Far more voices—including most individual [Arab](#) and [European](#) states—have expressed cautious support.

One important faction, however, has been united in its rejection: US Democratic candidates for president. Former VP [Joe Biden](#) was blunt: “A peace plan requires two sides to come together. This is a political stunt that could spark unilateral moves to annex territory and set back peace even more.” He added, “I’ve spent a lifetime working to advance the security & survival of a Jewish and democratic Israel.” True to form, Biden revealed more than he intended, implicitly acknowledging that two

decades of American-led negotiations in which he had a key role failed to bring the Palestinians to the table.

Elizabeth Warren [piled on criticism](#), saying, “Releasing a plan without negotiating with Palestinians isn’t diplomacy, it’s a sham. I will oppose unilateral annexation in any form—and reverse any policy that supports it.” This appears to ignore the rounds of negotiations under the Obama administration in 2010 and 2013-14. It also ignores the two-year [development of the Trump plan](#), which included consultations with previous American negotiators, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, the UAE, and Turkey, but which was effectively boycotted by the PA from the start.

Bernie Sanders [demanded that](#) “Any acceptable peace deal must be consistent with international law and multiple UN Security Council resolutions. It must end the Israeli occupation that began in 1967 and enable Palestinian self-determination in an independent, democratic, economically viable state of their own alongside a secure and democratic state of Israel.” This repeats sacred mantras about “international law” and the “occupation,” setting the clock back to 1967, and giving veto power to the UN and hence Arab-Islamic and subservient blocs.

Why have the Democratic presidential candidates expressed such antipathy? Part of the answer is simple. A fundamental principle of American politics today is instinctive and absolute rejection of anything connected with Trump, be it word or deed. This childish impulse, endlessly on display, has eroded the critical faculties of politicians and media alike. Even Obama-era policies that are quietly continued under the Trump administration are rejected.

But at a deeper level, the candidates’ rejection shows a troubling addiction to past orthodoxies—namely, expert-driven analysis and investment in processes that have offered little progress in the past decades. But this is not merely an example of the Sunk Cost Fallacy, which justifies continued investment on the basis of previous expenditure. Casting Democrats and their allied experts as impartial technocrats who rise above politics is a longstanding conceit going all the way back to the 1960s. The question of success, whether in international or domestic affairs, rarely matters.

Heterodox approaches are automatically dismissed as “right wing” fantasies or, worse, manipulations. Within this position is the belief that only certified experts can solve problems while others are *de facto* buffoons: witness the insults leveled at the plan’s developer, Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner, by the [media](#) and its allied wing of [late night comedians](#). But the bizarre corollary is the Democratic Party’s unshakeable faith in failed experts and their unsuccessful plans. Long-time diplomat Martin Indyk, for example, [described the plan](#) as “a farce from start to finish”—and his viewpoint is touted by Democrats as authoritative, despite his being another veteran of fruitless negotiations in both Democratic and Republican administrations.

Failure has become the highest qualification for expert commentary and future diplomacy.

The American media [echo chamber](#), which simply parrots talking points fed to it by the foreign policy blob, has created a closed cycle of received wisdom, authority, and interpretation. The [New York Times](#), for example, described the plan as a cynical election ploy by two corrupt leaders responding to right wing religious constituents that “hardly seems to hold out any real hope for meaningful Palestinian sovereignty or real improvement in their people’s condition.”

This formula suggests there is an underlying non-zero sum mentality at work in the Democratic candidates and their experts. Somehow, against the evidence of history, there cannot be winners and losers in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Winning is in fact immoral and in the name of fairness cannot be permitted. That Israel has won the Arab-Israeli conflict in military, economic, demographic, and to some extent even diplomatic terms does not register, and if it does, it may be evidence of “sin.” Somehow, everyone must win.

But this non-zero sum mentality shades into utopianism and denial of reality. It is always 1967 or 1978 or 1993; indeed, it must be, for the conditions habitually demanded by experts as starting points for renewed negotiations, particularly the sanctity of the “1967 borders,” describe not the conditions of today but rather of the past. In this view there are no penalties for Palestinian rejection and failure, just as there are no rewards for Israel’s prevailing in protracted conflict. There are only endless restarts at precisely the same point without any reference to what has come in between.

Negotiator Aaron David Miller complained, for example, that in contrast with the [decades of negotiations](#) where “various US initiatives on final peace deals with Israel, Syria and the Palestinians were designed to launch talks, bridge gaps, create trust between the parties and ultimately reach comprehensive accords,” the current plan “has put the Palestinians on a kind of probation. If they disarm Hamas, Palestine and Islamic Jihad, establish good governance, recognize Israel as a Jewish state, among other things, then and only then is a faux state possible.”

This is precisely true. But the embrace of a consequence-less world speaks to both a static conception that reeks of unreality but also a worldview in which Palestinians are not simply “underdogs” but possess no agency. The idea appears to be that Palestinians cannot act; they can only react, and they must be managed and propitiated lest they snarl or attack. In Europe and among the global left, this condescension is masked by high rhetoric about the Palestinians as the “most important cause of all time,” which simply allows Westerners to project their own moralism, manipulations, and antisemitism.

Palestinians have become accustomed to being instruments of someone else's mobilization, first in the Arab and Islamic worlds, in past decades in Europe, and now in the US. In the latter cases Palestinians are a left-wing electoral cause to mobilize socialist, Muslim, and intersectional minorities. The actual facts of the geopolitical situation, and of Palestinian society and culture, matter little. Proponents egg on Palestinian rejectionism—witness the tens of millions of dollars in support provided by European NGOs for Palestinian lawfare—creating a cycle of disappointment that achieves little for the Palestinians but from which the proponents profit.

Trump has not ended this cycle by any means, but has rebalanced the debate toward reality. The Democratic candidates promise a return to the past but even they will ultimately have to contend with that reality. There are scattered signs that other adjustments may already be occurring. Curiously, while [J Street](#) reacted with typical hysteria to the plan, other portions of the [American Jewish left](#) have shown glimmerings of acceptance, based on the plan's cautious endorsement by centrist security-oriented figures in Israel, including Benny Gantz, Ehud Barak, and Amos Yadlin.

Whether these views—which of course still drip with antipathy toward Trump and Netanyahu—will influence Democratic candidates remains unclear. But this partial acknowledgment of reality represents the bargaining stage of grief. The Palestinian leadership appears permanently trapped in the second stage of grief, anger, but the Palestinian people seem to be in a depression. Encouraging them to move forward toward acceptance is critical. Democratic presidential candidates should be encouraged to do the same.

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