

Text of speech by Daniel Levy

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Session 4. Middle Eastern Settlement: An Exploded Quiet?

[Speech as prepared for delivery]

What I would like to suggest is, the quiet, the manageability of the Israeli-Palestinian situation covers important dynamics below the surface and to suggest that the Trump administration could play in some way, an unintended role in accelerating those dynamics.

So, I am going to look at five things:

- i. What to make of this US administration on Israel-Palestine, where is the continuity, where is the change and what is driving it?
- ii. How that impacts Israeli dynamics.
- iii. How that impacts Palestinian dynamics.
- iv. Briefly how the regional situation plays into that.
- v. And finally, what Russia and other actors can do.

1. US-Israel: past vs. now

Pre-Trump, the US approach was to ask the Israeli side, quietly and politely, to do something Israel has no desire or intention of doing – allowing for a sovereign Palestinian state, based on the 1967 lines, East and West Jerusalem as the capital of the two states respectively etc. – while also making unequivocally clear that if Israel said no, then everything on the US-Israel side would be absolutely fine, full US support, diplomatic, political and financial for Israel.

One should not be surprised that invariably the Israeli answer was thanks but no thanks, we will continue with the occupation and settlements if it's all the same to you. That was the past, now even the polite mentioning of the uncomfortable questions has been dropped and the end-game itself seems to have changed.

So there is continuity in US policy in that America never had the political will to use its leverage, especially with Israel to get an end to occupation and settlements, get a withdrawal, get two states but there is also change, in terms of the end-game, in terms of the powerful alignment of American and Israeli political forces. The headline item has been the Jerusalem declaration which was actually not

nuanced, only mentioning Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem and then saying the issue was off the table. But in addition to the Jerusalem declaration, the threatened closure of the PLO office/embassy in Washington D.C., and UNRWA funding, are all indicative of the change.

This does not shift the fundamentals of an already failing peace process. The apparent quiet on the Israel-Palestine front, which preceded the recent US announcement on Jerusalem, actually masked an ongoing deterioration in the situation which was making increasingly irreversible the Israeli policy of emasculating/rendering practically impossible a two-state option and empowering more extreme governing forces on the Israeli side.

Here two slides were presented visually which are attached. The first, shows the West Bank with the areas of built-up settlements, industrial zones, municipal areas and regional councils, while the second, shows the de-facto territorial situation from the proposed UN partition plan until today.

The Trump administration policy does change something in terms of the perception of the US, it furthers radicalization in the region and beyond – where the US position on Jerusalem is again a recruitment tool for extremism, and it does something to dynamics inside Israel and Palestine, many of which were already in motion.

I have no expectations for a so-called Trump peace plan and to understand why this administration will stay the course in empowering hardliners in Israel, one should look at what I would call the four elements in the personnel/policy mix of this administration on this issue:

- i. The first group, want to dismiss and remove the Palestinian issue by threatening and bludgeoning the Palestinians with help from certain states within the region and also perhaps financial inducements to build a revamped regional Pax-Americana including presenting a diktat to the Palestinians. That would serve a narrow reading of US interests and very likely the narrow personal interest of some of the Trump family protagonists. It is also based on a certain naivety.
- ii. The second group, come from a genuine ideological commitment within an important Republican constituency – the dispensationalist wing of the **Evangelical Christian community** and the role Israel plays in that theology; the ingathering, the end times prophecies which make them a pro-hardline Greater Israel lobby.
- iii. Another important part of the Trump base – and the consistent feature of this administration is to sustain the solid support of that 40% base – is the alt-right. Israel has become an issue within contemporary cultural wars in America and love of Zionism as a model for the alt-right ambition of a Christian white America with its attendant hatred of Palestinians as well as an Islamophobic agenda.

Of course, neither of the above are exactly good for the Jews.

- iv. The fourth component is all about the minority of the American Jewish community (approximately 25%) who vote Republican. Some of those are simply pro-low tax/small government traditional Republicans, most however, come from the orthodox Jewish community, are more socially conservative and far more hawkish on Israel, including some very significant Republican donors, notably a major financial backer of both Trump and Netanyahu, the casino magnate Sheldon Adelson.

This outlook is represented by a figure who should not be underestimated in today's policy making – US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, the former bankruptcy lawyer for President Trump who is ideologically aligned with the Israeli settler right and is very effectively doing their bidding and the Israeli government's bidding. We have more of a Friedman policy than an American policy.

By the way, what of our old "friends", the neo-conservatives, on this issue they are less relevant today and some are sniffing around hawks on the Democrat side in search of relevance.

There are a number of side effects flowing from the above that I won't go into but one of them is chipping away at the American bipartisan consensus on Israel that could have important implications for the future of US-Israel relations, not least in terms of the Jewish community.

What matters most in the US policy shift is how all this plays into dynamics within Israel and Palestine because this will in the end be decided not by Americans or anyone else but by Israelis and Palestinians.

2. Israel

On the Israeli side, this represents an opportunity, certainly for a part of the ascendant hardline national-religious and Greater Israeli community but one that is likely to prove more of a problem than an opportunity for Israel at large.

The Israeli debate has shifted ever further to the right. Much of that debate now revolves around the practical rather than ideological question of whether to pursue option one – to continue to control the territories and Palestinians under the cover of a peace process and via a stealth Bantustan system or two – whether to formalize what is perceived to be Israel's victory and the crushing of the Palestinians by formally annexing territory and formalizing the apartheid regime warned against by two former Israeli Prime Ministers, Barak and Olmert.

Inside Israel, this is giving a strong impetus to a fundamentalist extremism and a maximalist vision of formalizing control and annexation. This has potentially destabilizing implications for Jordan and implicitly contains the seed of an ultimate expulsionist logic.

Interestingly, this could even be a problem for Netanyahu. The current system seems to be working for Israel in managing the conflict, why break it if it works. Netanyahu is able to boast about the significant improvements to Israel's global and regional standing and relations.

Those within the Israeli system who are in a hurry today to achieve as much as possible while Trump is in power, seek to formalize Greater Israel and therefore undermine the existing tried and tested occupation management strategy.

But there is a problem for Israel, of course – because as long as the Palestinians physically remain on the ground, Israel has a problem, a major one.

I would like to address one other issue in this context. There was an assumption, amongst some, for many years, that Israel always had a fallback option – the option of a unilateral withdrawal by Israel on the West Bank to more or less the route of the separation/security barrier/wall – leaving +/- 90% of

the territories. There are variations on this idea, some I would suggest are more acceptable, some far less. Without commenting on the desirability or otherwise of such ideas, for many Israelis the fallback allowed an assumption of reversibility and that a one-state conundrum could always be avoided. The important point is that under contemporary Israeli political realities this fallback option looks increasingly tenuous with the odds stacked against it.

To put this issue in clear terms, after so many years of occupation, the permanent matrix of Israeli control seems to work, Israel can manage this with no time limit.

But, the subjugation of the Palestinians only works until the day that it no longer works. When that moment comes, then, as in any conflict, if the more powerful party has not left itself an off-ramp, if there is no exit strategy, then it has a real and potentially existential problem. Israel is burning that off-ramp and in traveling in that direction it is receiving unprecedented encouragement from the US, perhaps burning the off-ramp in irreversible ways.

3. Palestinian dynamics

The flipside of course is how this impacts Palestinian dynamics. Briefly - the new American approach is a problem but also perhaps an opportunity for the Palestinians.

The problem is clear – the US threats, the attempts to impose a diktat, to blame the Palestinians, withdrawal of financial support and playing in the leadership succession issue. Of course, many of the problems are of Israel's making. Many too are of the Palestinians own making - the internal division, the absence of an effective strategy etc.

On the Palestinian side, I would suggest a key debate revolves around whether, one - to maintain *sumud*/ steadfastness, given current Palestinian weakness in the Israeli-Palestinian power dynamic as well as new regional problems and therefore to work from within the status quo. Or whether two - to more directly challenge the status quo – notably to revisit the methods and aims of the Palestinians, seen for instance in the increasing interest in an equal rights/civil rights struggle and popular nonviolent mobilization within the one political space which Israel has created.

So, should the Palestinians adopt a defensive or a disruptive posture?

Trump administration moves may accelerate a trend, and it would be an unintended consequence, but Trump may be an accelerant of the bringing to a close of this phase of a type of peace process that has evidently not worked for the Palestinians. It is clear that a Palestinian strategy based on America delivering Israel for peace is fantastical. It is delusional.

The key challenge for the Palestinians should also be quite clear – to address the power imbalance and to gain leverage.

No people were ever given their freedom out of the benevolence of an occupying power, people have to struggle and challenge and disrupt the status quo that works against their interests.

A new Palestinian strategy to accumulate leverage would be difficult but possible either outside of or alongside the existing peace process. The opportunity potentially for the Palestinians is the clarity that Trump offers, the Israeli overreach that Trump has accelerated and the vulnerability that Israel seems

to have to a non-violent, popular civil resistance and perhaps to an equal rights struggle. See the resonance of what has happened with the teenager from Nabi Salih, Ahed Tamimi.

4. I'll say a word on the region

That Palestinian choice and the prospects of progress are made more risky and more difficult given the regional moment we are in.

The Palestinian issue has always been instrumentalized within regional geopolitics. The current degree of division and polarization within the region is perhaps unprecedented and certainly places extra challenges on the Palestinians making the possibility of a unified mobilization of support currently seem impossible. It also creates some regional opportunities for Israel.

Nevertheless, the US undermined its own strategy of regional division and a new/old Pax-Americana by placing the Jerusalem issue front and center. That was a counterproductive and ill-conceived move. The more open axis the US is trying to build between Israel, certain Gulf states and Egypt, mostly targeting Iran, was shown to have its limitations.

That axis will not be able to impose a plan on the Palestinians that only offers permanent second-class status or worse to the Palestinians and falls short of all international benchmarks, parameters and legality.

5. Fifth and finally, what does this mean for Russia and other international actors?

First, this should not be about returning to the failed peace process, which is part of the problem – and resuming that process is not a worthy or helpful goal in itself, it has become a tool for managing the occupation and entrenching control. In fact talks could do more harm than good, creating expectations that will be dashed, and further poisoning possible options for the future.

It is also therefore not about creating a new mechanism for those talks. We have an international mechanism, the Quartet, it has been subsumed to the American position for many many years and is not helpful. Adding a couple more member states to the Quartet, will not change the structural flaws.

I would suggest that we are entering a new phase on Israel-Palestine.

If we focus on the 1967 issue, then for 25 years following the 1967 war until the Oslo agreement, Israel managed the occupation and the Palestinians directly via a military and civil administration against a backdrop of the shock of 1967 and of the *Naksa*.

For the next quarter of a century, from 1993 until now, the Oslo process was the management device which included limited Palestinian self-governance but ultimately allowed Israel to control things in a different way, less directly costly, internationally funded, with some Palestinian security subcontracting and cooptation to a significant degree.

That is now reaching its end and the question is what will replace it. Central to that will be the struggle of who defines the next phase and central to the answer to that question will be the power dynamics and whether the Palestinians can generate any shifts in those dynamics. Certainly, no talks between two such asymmetrical parties can produce mutually acceptable outcomes.

The Trump accelerator may just generate that shift, it is not a safe bet, but it is possible. In the meantime, there are things that can be done by Russia and others:

- i. Firstly, keep the focus on Gaza – the appalling conditions, how to improve them, as well as how to prevent an escalation of violence and another devastating round of destruction.
- ii. Secondly, how to be supportive and facilitating of an end to internal Palestinian political division – I don't know if you can call it full reconciliation, that would be better, but certainly the emergence of a new Palestinian national platform and strategy. Russia hosted talks in January 2017. This is ultimately a Palestinian decision but outside assistance can be helpful.
- iii. Thirdly, sending a signal of accountability rather than impunity to Israel for its unlawful and illegal practices. Recognizing Israel's legitimate security needs not its expansionist practices and designs.