

[EU must stand up to Trump's Middle East 'peace plan'](#)

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The prevailing mood among European diplomats dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of despair: the peace process is dead, the two-state solution seems gone, and the United States is taking one detrimental step after another. Meanwhile, the European Union appears to be stuck on the sidelines.

Yet in fact, Europe's role has rarely been as important and its responsibility rarely as big as they are now.

For decades, Europe has advocated a two-state solution that would involve the state of Israel and a state of Palestine "living side by side in peace and security". The EU has described its achievement as its "fundamental interest" and a "strategic priority".

Over time, developments on the ground, in particular the expansion of Israeli settlements across the territory of the prospective Palestinian state, have made this solution increasingly impossible. But as long as the US stood behind the two-state vision together with the rest of the international community, there was some hope.

Paradigmatic shift

The Trump administration, however, seems bent on shifting the paradigm away from the two-state solution as it was defined under previous US administrations with the EU's acquiescence and support. Its long-expected "peace plan" — the purported Deal of the Century — is widely expected to downgrade the parameters of the prospective Palestinian entity in terms of its territory and effective sovereignty.

After repeated delays, nobody can tell with certainty when and if at all the plan will be released. But with an administration that has already shown its determination to upend established norms in a number of areas, the possibility of the plan should be taken seriously. For the supporters of the Israeli political right who hold key positions in the Trump administration, the president's term in office is a time-limited opportunity to bring about a maximum policy shift.

Even if we dismiss all the leaks and speculation about the US scheme so far, it is implausible that a plan drafted by Trump's advisors with a history of connections to and support for Israeli settlements will follow past orthodoxy. And even if Washington eventually labels the proposed Palestinian entity a "state", that will not compensate for the likely hollowing out of the two-state solution in substance.

The paradigmatic shift has already been visible in the stream of measures taken by the Trump administration: green-lighting Israeli settlements, moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, defunding the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, ending US aid to Palestinians, and shutting down the Palestinian mission in Washington and the US consulate for Palestinians in Jerusalem. But the "peace" plan would likely codify the new paradigm explicitly.

Parameters

Doesn't the US plan deserve some benefit of doubt? After all, previous peace efforts have failed, so some out-of-the-box thinking is warranted.

The problem is that the two-state solution according to past US parameters was already so weighted in Israel's favour that there is simply no space for further concessions on the Palestinian side that would be compatible with a notion of a sovereign and viable state. The Palestinian state as foreseen under US Presidents from Clinton to Obama would comprise 22 per cent of historical Palestine (leaving 78 per cent to

Israel), divided into two parts (West Bank and Gaza), with land swaps allowing Israel to retain some of its settlements stretching into the West Bank and encircling Jerusalem, and would be non-militarised. Palestinian refugees in the neighbouring countries would be allowed to resettle into the new Palestinian state, with only a small fraction allowed to return to their or their ancestors' homes in today's Israel.

The Palestinian leadership under President Abbas had agreed to such parameters in principle. However, any further downgrade of the envisaged Palestinian state would turn it into a mere bantustan under effective Israeli control — and is certain to be rejected by Palestinians, just as it would be by any other society in their place.

If the US plan proposes permanent Israeli security control over the West Bank or permanent presence of Israeli settlers (short of giving all Palestinians equal rights in a one-state solution), this would go against fundamental norms of international order that the EU stands for.

Not only would such a plan fail to bring peace, it would exacerbate the conflict and make it even more intractable.

Europe's relevance

German foreign minister Heiko Maas has [argued](#) that "where the USA crosses the line, we Europeans must form a counterweight — as difficult as that can be". Trump's Middle East plan is looking to be one such case.

To the extent that Europe still cares about the two-state solution, it must be prepared to firmly reject the Trump plan if, as expected, it does not envisage a sovereign and viable Palestinian state in line with established parameters.

Rather than sit and wait for the plan, the EU or a group of key member states should now restate the [agreed EU parameters](#) for the two-state solution that were laid out in July 2014 and declare readiness to support a US plan that meets them and accords with international law. This will set a clear and non-controversial benchmark, putting the EU in a better position for saying no to the plan if it does not pass the test.

Setting the criteria in advance may be a more effective way of influencing Washington than attempting "dialogue". There is a lesson to be learned in this regard from the failure of high-level European engagement to prevent or even moderate Trump's pull-out from the Iran nuclear deal. At the same time, the configuration is different: whereas the US's aim with the Iran deal was to get rid of it, in this case they want to push something new and therefore need international buy-in.

That's why the European position matters, alongside the stance of key Arab countries. This is all the more true given that the Palestinians have already made clear they will reject the US plan. The international response will determine whether the plan will be accepted as a new baseline for peace-making despite the Palestinian opposition or dismissed as a momentary blip. As a result, the EU's role is more relevant than under past US administrations when the Palestinians were broadly on board and the EU's stamp of legitimacy could be taken for granted.

Dead on arrival

In the words of a senior US official [quoted](#) in the press, "getting the right reaction is critical" and that's why it is important to release the plan "at a time when the substance can be accepted by the maximum number of players" — one reason for its repeated postponements. "You can't put something out where everybody says, 'Ah, this is dead on arrival'," the official continued.

If the plan does not meet the EU's parameters, then this is precisely what the Europeans should aim for. Rejecting Trump's plan will not in of itself bring the situation closer to peace. But it will at least preserve the

vision of a fair and peaceful resolution of the conflict and enable a future return to the international consensus around it.