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Deal of the Century: Reading of Arab Attitudes

Mohamed Abu Saada

According to a [study](#) published by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), an Israeli think tank, President Donald Trump aims through his proposals known as the “Deal of the Century” to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and provide regional conditions that could contribute to the achievement of the strategic objectives of the American national security. The study that is prepared by a former Israeli army officer who writes for INSS on regional security matters, Col. (res.) Shimon Arad, says Trump administration has commissioned some Arab regimes to bring the Palestinians to negotiations with Israel and at the same time legitimize the concessions that they will have to make to Tel Aviv, provided that these Arab regimes will be committed to providing a financial cover to attract the Palestinians for returning to negotiations and making concessions. This is because the United States believes that solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict provides an environment conducive to strengthening relations between Tel Aviv and the Gulf states, which is considered a fundamental requirement to weaken Iran.

However, what the United States seeks is facing difficult challenges, most notably:

- The Palestinian Authority's position towards the US administration after its decision to transfer the US Embassy to Jerusalem;
- The public Arab rejection of the proposals of Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt during their Middle East tour on June 22 2017;

- The [differences](#) within the Israeli government regarding some of the provisions of the deal of the century, because the plan requires Israel's withdrawal from some Israeli settlements in Jerusalem.

Based on the assumption that the success of any deal of that weight requires regional supporting positions. This report will track the regional positions towards the deal of the century. It will examine whether it is a comprehensive deal, a deal for the Palestinian issue only, or an economic humanitarian deal? with an attempt to provide a future outlook in this regard.

First: Features of the American plan

Commenting on the so-called “deal of the century”, Ahmad Majdalani, member of the PLO Executive Committee, said (January 9, 2018) that the deal proposals were aimed at liquidating the Palestinian issue through an exchange of land, after the expansion of the Gaza Strip at the expense of Sinai geographically; and the expansion of the Israeli occupation at the expense of settlement blocs located in the West Bank and areas of the Jordan Valley.

According to Majdalani, the Palestinian state will be as follows: the expanded Gaza Strip including an international port and airport under international supervision, and the West Bank (A, B areas) that will be connected together in a way or another, provided that Israel maintains security guarantees (air, land and sea) in such a way that the expected Palestinian state loses its sovereignty, in the sense of extensive autonomy. According to the [plan](#), Gaza residents will benefit from the construction of a large international port (in the western sector of Greater Gaza), an international airport, 25 kilometers from the border with Israel, and a new city that can absorb at

least one million people and a natural growth and development area for the population of Gaza and the West Bank.

Haaretz, an Israeli newspaper, quoted unidentified Israeli sources as saying that an American delegation seek to convince Arab countries to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in implementation of projects aimed at helping the Gaza Strip. These projects will be held in the Egyptian region of Sinai. Israel also agreed in principle to establish a sea port in Cyprus for the transfer of goods to the Gaza Strip, provided that Hamas hands over the Israeli soldiers it is holding in Gaza, according to [Hebrew](#) media.

Second: Attitude of conflict parties toward the “deal of the century”

1- The Palestinian position

The state of division and fragmentation of the Palestinian political system is very complicated. There are more than one party in the Palestinian political system that present themselves as holders of power and government in the Palestinian territories that are still “occupied”, including the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), which is completely controlled by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas after disruption of the Palestinian legislative authority, although both (executive and legislative powers) have become illegitimate.

However, the Palestinian reconciliation, which can reform the situation of the Palestinian political system, albeit “partially”, is still stalled. Despite the fact that many agreements have been concluded in this regard, the Palestinian Authority does not have full control over the Gaza Strip. However, it can be stated that the political forces that continue to have influence in the Palestinian scene and the Gaza Strip to a large extent are Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. In order to understand the scene, this

paper will present their attitude toward the so-called “Deal of the Century” or the “Gaza Deal” as some prefer to call.

(A) Palestinian Authority

The Palestinian official position, represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority can be summed up in the statements given by Mr. Nabil Abu Rudeina, spokesman for the Palestinian presidency, who referred to the “deal of the century”, as a “Gaza deal” aimed at striking the Palestinian national project by turning the Palestinian issue from a political issue into an economic humanitarian issue through the Gaza gate. He added that the US administration and some suspicious and conspiring parties thought that the attempt to remove the issue of Jerusalem and refugees, as well as the abolition of the nuclear agreement with Iran, could open the door for the “Gaza Deal” which is rejected by Palestinians, Arab countries, and the international community. Abu Rudeina also said that the ongoing ideas, proposals, and illusions are aimed at the abolition of Palestinian national identity, and the killing of the national project, away from achievement of any progress in the [peace process](#).

Apart from statements, the Palestinian Authority has taken practical steps in the face of the so-called "Deal of the Century". Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has been boycotting the Trump administration since Trump [declared](#) recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of the Israeli occupation state. Perhaps Abbas's visit to Istanbul during the Summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on 18 May 2018, and his strong-worded [speech](#) against the US administration is an example for this. On the other hand, Abbas is negotiating with Hamas and other Palestinian factions to form a government of national unity. In this regard, he met with former Prime Minister Salam Fayyad on 2 July 2018, and discussed with him the formation of

a national unity government, with the aim of unifying the Palestinian position to [face](#) the “deal of the century”.

At the same time, Abbas made some decisions against the Gaza population, most notably the pay cuts for Palestinian Authority employees in the Gaza Strip. He justified this as a means of exerting pressure on Hamas to accept the conditions of reconciliation and hand over the Gaza Strip to the Palestinian Authority. But Abbas's actions represented a double-edged sword. They could be a great pressure on Hamas's battered rule in Gaza. But they could also weaken Hamas in a way that makes its position weak and unable to bear the regional and international pressures and temptations offered through the “deal of the century”.

A segment of the Palestinian street is still apprehensive about the positions and measures of the Palestinian Authority against the Gaza Strip, and is not convinced that it is aimed at sabotaging the “deal of the century”.

(B) The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas)

It is clear that the Hamas movement is suffering from great regional pressure which is also felt by the Palestinian citizen living in the Gaza Strip. Although there is official government in Gaza, Hamas controls the Strip. Hamas also deals with the recent Israeli escalation and aggressive practices towards Gaza with a mentality that is different from the style of the military wing of Hamas. After military sites were directly targeted by the Israeli Air Force, where several training sites and tunnels for resistance were destroyed, Hamas adopted a strategy of restraint.

Some analysts justify Hamas' behavior in several ways:

a- Hamas seems to have realized that the coming war will be different from previous wars, and that the internal front in the Gaza Strip cannot [tolerate](#) new wars.

b- Hamas is now aware that it is at great risk, which could negatively affect its military future.

c- Hamas has become more mature in making war decisions.

d- Hamas has become like the Arab regimes in the face of any aggression by saying “the right response at the right time”.

The above explanations and others may explain the reasons for Hamas’ rush towards Egypt. In addition, a number of regional parties seek to sponsor holding secret contacts between Hamas and Israel on concluding a [prisoner swap](#) deal. These parties also sponsor regional and international plans aimed at the [reconstruction](#) of Gaza in the absence of the Palestinian Authority.

The previous positions of Hamas show that Hamas is extremely cautious about the “deal of the century”, intending to gain time as much as possible, and hoping for the occurrence of regional and international changes in favor of the Palestinian cause. However, the quiet and balanced tactics of Hamas do not necessarily mean that there is no confusion among the movement’s leaders. For example, Mahmoud Zahhar, member of the Hamas political bureau, said in a statement that “There have been large numbers of Palestinians from Gaza living in Egypt; and that no one opposes the presence of Palestinians in any country, including Egypt, provided that there would not be any political price for that. Zahhar did not mind the presence of a port and airport and others without expecting any political price in return. Zahhar's latest position carries many question marks, the most important of which is how a leader of the weight of Zahhar could expect the possibility of obtaining gains without having to provide a [political price](#) in return?”

In general, the official position of Hamas is clear: it rejects the “deal of the century” or any dubious humanitarian deal. This is evidenced by the Hamas refusal to deal with the United States in its moves to promote peace between Gaza and the Israel, despite the United States’ agreement to cooperate with the movement “if it renounces terrorism”. Hamas also described Greenblatt and Kushner as “[spokesmen](#) for the Israeli occupation”. However, the Islamic resistance movement is striving to reach solutions to the humanitarian crisis of the people of Gaza, as well as its political crisis, through Egyptian efforts, especially in light of the pressure cards it possesses such as the file of Israeli captives.

It is clear that the deal of the century faces official rejection from the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian factions and the Palestinian people. However, this rejection alone is not enough. In order for the Palestinians to succeed in confronting the deal of the century, they must unite as soon as possible, and all Palestinian efforts and energies should also be united; so that no Palestinian party would be left alone exposed to external pressures. Can the Palestinians do so amid the ambitions of many Fatah and Hamas leaders to succeed Abbas? Or the main Palestinian parties (Fatah and Hamas) play the game of gaining time to reach power no more?

2- The Israeli Position

The Israeli position cannot be compared to the Palestinian position, in light of the instability of the Israeli political system. In addition, the Israeli government enjoys unlimited support from the current US administration, which makes the deal of the century closer to being pure Israeli thought, planning and direction – especially that there are hardly any official Israeli statements that have addressed the details of the

deal so far. In this case, the role of the US Administration and its regional allies would be restricted to only implementation.

But this does not mean that there is an Israeli consensus on the perceptions that emerged about the deal of the century. The current Israeli government is extreme right, and Israeli society is going to extremes. These are indicators that could lead to the failure of the deal of the century. The question of the existence of a Palestinian state in any form is rejected by a large number of Israeli leaders and elites, especially that there are a number of right-wing Israeli leaders who believe that parts of Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf belong to the Israeli occupation state. There are some reports that Washington wants Israel to accept the annexation of only 10% of the West Bank and the Israeli settlement blocs, while Netanyahu insists on annexing 15% of the [West Bank](#) territories.

It is also impossible to ignore the dilemmas suffered by the current Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and his wife, including corruption charges, the military tensions between Israel on the one hand and the Iranian militias in Syria and the Palestinian resistance movements in Gaza on the other, in addition to the upcoming Israeli [elections](#) in November 2019.

Third: Attitudes of Arab countries toward the “deal of the century”

The Palestinian Authority claims that the Trump administration is trying to use the Gaza Strip as a “key” to present to leaders of “moderate” Arab countries for moving forward with the “deal of the century”. According to sources in the Trump administration, Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt will try to collect between \$500 million and \$ 1 billion from Arab countries for financing a series of projects that serve

the Gaza Strip. It is hoped that these projects will calm the security situation and create a positive momentum for the presentation of President Trump's "deal of the century".

1- The Egyptian position

Following the Egyptian official position regarding the deal of the century, we can conclude three perceptions about the official position of the Egyptian deal, namely:

a- A complete Egyptian rejection

This comes in light of the statements of Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry that the deal of the century does not mean giving up any Egyptian land, and that what is raised around it are "misinterpretations aimed at provoking controversy" and that what is being circulated is mere test balloons, as Sisi cannot abandon an inch of the soil of the [homeland](#).

Perhaps the Egyptian army's military campaigns against armed groups in Sinai supports this position, as why is the Egyptian army fighting in a land that it might later give up?

b- A complete Egyptian approval

This perception is based on the official Egyptian position regarding the waiver of the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, that Sisi is the one who first used the term "deal of the century", and the demolitions undertaken by the Egyptian army's in Sinai is just a step toward implementation of the deal of the century.

c- Activation of the alternative plan

There are some reports that Egypt has presented a plan to Hamas for improving the situation in the Gaza Strip, including the establishment of a joint commercial zone between the Gaza Strip and North Sinai, improving the situation at the Rafah crossing, and the possibility of using El Arish airport by Gazans. According to the reports, the

Egyptians would implement this plan even if Hamas did not agree. Egyptian intelligence sources said they would continue efforts to implement reconciliation and that they were waiting for response from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Hamas did not deny the reports, but declined to give [details](#) on them.

In the researcher's opinion, the third possibility or the Egyptian alternative plan, is the closest to reality, for the following reasons:

- Political reasons

Egypt seeks to remain the main player in the Palestinian cause. Egypt has always presented itself to the regional and international systems as having the greatest influence on all Palestinian parties. In addition to the fact that the Palestinian cause adds more momentum to the Egyptian foreign policy in international political circles, it is also considered an Egyptian national security issue of the first degree. Therefore, Egypt seeks finding solutions to the Palestinian question without prejudice to Egyptian rights.

- Economic reasons

It is known that the Egyptian regime regards the economic challenges as one of the biggest challenges facing it, and is striving to solve them in every possible way. The plan of the commercial zone between Egypt and Gaza may be part of the solution to the Egyptian crisis, especially that Egypt wants to export its products to the Gaza Strip instead of the Chinese products; and Egypt hopes to achieve an income of more than [\\$2.5](#) billion a year. Egypt also seeks to benefit from the sources of funding in Gaza, especially in the presence of about \$9.6 billion as deposits for customers in Palestinian banks in Gaza, in addition to the presence of about \$10 billion a year as a liquidity for trade in the sector, according to the Palestinian Monetary Authority. This means that

the Gaza Strip has sufficient financial liquidity and cash to manage a convenient business process with Egypt, according to specialists in [economic](#) affairs.

2- The Jordanian position

“The Jordanian position on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the peace process, and the final solution is stable and unchanged,” said Jordanian government spokeswoman Jumana Ghoneim, adding: “With regard to the deal of the century we have not been explicitly informed of its content, not even during the recent visit of the chief [adviser](#) to US President, Jared Kushner, to the Kingdom.

One of the manifestations of Jordanian reservations to the deal of the century, is the recent Jordanian-Turkish rapprochement, in light of the two visits the Jordanian King Abdullah II has paid to Turkey at the invitation of Turkish President Erdogan, as well as the development of Jordan's relations with the President of the Palestinian Authority. The reasons for Jordan's rejection of the so-called deal of the century may be due to the following reasons:

- The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is keen on maintaining its supervision over the holy sites in the Palestinian territories, especially after the remarks of Trump’s adviser “Jared Kushner” during the ceremony of the US Embassy transfer to Jerusalem that Israel is responsible for supervising the whole of Jerusalem – and completely ignoring Jordan's sovereignty over the holy places in the city.
- The Palestinian refugee issue: Jordan is concerned that the United States will ask them to accept all Palestinian refugees on his territory and grant them equal status to the rest of the population, which could contribute to significant changes in the political life and social identity of the Kingdom, in addition to Jordan's fear of Palestinian anger at the Jordanian home, which could lead to unrest.

As a result of the aforementioned Jordanian concerns, as well as Jordanian positions rejecting the deal of the century, Jordan has been suffering from severe pressure that has become apparent during the unrest in the Jordanian capital as a result of the difficult economic situation in the Kingdom. The influx of thousands of Syrian refugees on the Jordanian-Syrian border may be another way to put pressure on Jordan. Perhaps also the meeting between the Jordanian monarch and the Israeli prime minister in Amman (18 June 2018) came as an additional US-Israeli effort to ease the king's opposition to the “deal of the century”.

Therefore, it is expected that if Jordan sticks to its positions that reject the deal of the century, it will be subject to American, Israeli, regional, and international pressures that could threaten the stability of the Kingdom.

3- The Syrian position

Syria may be an important part of the so-called deal of the century, due to the geographical factor as it falls within the expansionist scope of the Israeli occupation state. Israel is seeking an official international recognition of its sovereignty in the Golan region, with the establishment of a buffer zone. Syria is also one of the most countries in the world that host Palestinian refugees and therefore it needs to settle them there. In this regard, it is expected that the Syrian regime will take one of the following positions in the so-called deal of the century:

a- Coping with the deal:

The Syrian regime is expected to provide security and peace to the Israeli occupation while relinquishing the occupied Syrian territories in the Golan. Some sources indicated that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad asked his Russian ally to bargain his full participation in the deal in return for staying in power. Despite the rapprochement

between Assad and his main ally Iran, sources explained that the security mentioned here is distancing Iran and Hezbollah from the Israeli border, and maintaining the security and protection of the borders as it done over the past decades.

Iran is therefore afraid of its presence in Syria as a result of this deal. This was confirmed by Bahruz Benyadi, an Iranian parliamentarian, when he said that Russia is “not a reliable friend to his country”. Addressing the parliament, Benyadi said that Russia and the Syrian regime would sacrifice Iran for their interests. He added that the positions of Syrian regime president Bashar al-Assad have become closer to Russia.

b- Opposing the deal:

It is not unlikely that the Syrian regime will make a decision to confront the US plan for the Palestinian cause and the region in general, through Iranian support in this direction. This means the increased likelihood of eruption of a fierce war between the Syrian regime and the Iranian militias on the one hand and Israel on the other. This may only happen if Russia decides to keep silent.

c- Formal opposition to the deal

The Syrian regime may take a pragmatic position in the American plan by adopting a vague position on the crisis, with the aim of achieving gains in its favor. This possibility would strengthen the continuation of the finger-snapping policy between Israel and the Syrian regime for a certain period of time. This may lead to a formal war for serving all parties (Iran to legitimize its presence in Syria, Israel to justify its military intervention in Syria, and the Syrian regime to reposition itself at the resistance axis and accuse his opponents of treachery).

The second and third scenarios are the closest to reality. Despite Russia’s recent rapprochement with the United States, it still possesses a vision and ambition in the

region that may differ with the United States at any moment. Also, Israel will not accept partial solutions, but it would like to have almost complete control over Syrian territory. Finally, Iran sees itself as reaching a point in its project that cannot be undone at any price. It is noteworthy that the Syrian regime cannot take unilateral decisions far from reaching a [consensus](#) with Russia and Iran.

4- The Saudi position

It seems that there are two positions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia towards the so-called “deal of the century”:

First: The position of Saudi King

Second: The position of Saudi Crown Prince

(A) The position of Saudi King

Saudi King Salman bin Abdel Aziz rejects any solutions that do not conform to the resolutions of international legitimacy and the Arab initiative that is based on the establishment of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders. During his speech in the opening of the 29th Arab League Summit, King Salman concentrated on talking about the Palestinian cause and stressed Riyadh's position in this regard. The Saudi monarch also decided to grant \$150 million to the Islamic Waqfs in Jerusalem and \$50 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Saudi Arabia's strong position on the Palestinian issue urged participants at the Dhahran Arab League Summit to adopt a final closing statement in which they rejected and condemned the American decision on Jerusalem and considered it null, and decided to provide necessary support for the Palestinian cause and stand by the Palestinian people to achieve their [legitimate](#) rights.

(B) The position of Saudi Crown Prince

According to the Times Newspaper and the Israeli channel 10, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman summoned the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, to Riyadh early November 2017 for a meeting. Details were overshadowed by the purge ordered shortly before by the prince of rival royals, ministers and businessmen on corruption allegations, and the apparently Saudi-orchestrated resignation of Saad Hariri, the Lebanese prime minister. Reports say that the prince told Mr Abbas to accept US Trump's proposals for a new peace drive with Israel. The Saudi Crown Prince told Abbas to "accept Trump's peace plan "when it is presented" or quit. He also ordered Abbas to keep away from any Iranian "influence".

A number of meetings were held between Saudi Crown Prince and Kushner to discuss several issues related to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the region as a whole. According to the Times, Bin Salman and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed, the de facto ruler of the UAE, want this plan to succeed "to allow them greater coordination with Israel against Iran without being accused of betraying the [Palestinian cause](#)."

It is therefore possible to say that the presence of King Salman bin Abdul Aziz in power hinders implementation of the deal of the century, and might change completely if Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman took power in Saudi Arabia.

5- The Qatari position

The head of the National Committee for the Reconstruction of Gaza, Mohamed Al-Emadi, reiterated the position of Doha on the Palestinian issue and its adherence to lifting the siege imposed on Gaza, stressing that his country will not interfere in the American "deal of the century", explaining that Doha will accept this peace plan only

if it was approved by the Authority Palestinian conflict. “Qatar is looking for a permanent solution to the problems of Gaza to spare the Strip any new war,” he said, stressing that Doha stands “at a distance” with the Palestinian factions, and the purpose of its intervention in the Gaza file is humanitarian. In another context, Al-Emadi revealed that there are indirect negotiations between Hamas and Israel in search of a “deal” on the Gaza Strip, with the knowledge of the US administration.

Al-Emadi pointed out that the administration of US President Donald Trump has recently submitted an initiative to implement projects in favor of the Gaza Strip, which will provide basic services such as electricity, potable water desalination, job creation and rehabilitation of the industrial zone in the Strip. He said that these proposals were made by Trump’s senior adviser, Jared Kushner, during his tour in the Middle East, where he visited Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Israel.

The Qatari role in the Gaza Strip can therefore be explained as follows:

1- The first explanation: What Qatar is doing in the Gaza Strip is a maneuver against its regional adversaries, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, through the Palestinian gate, as Qatar is suffering from great problems in light of the blockade imposed against it by a number of Arab countries.

2- The second explanation: What Qatar is doing in the Gaza Strip aims to strengthen the steadfastness of the Palestinian Authority and factions, by strengthening the foundations of life in Gaza, and spare Gaza any explosion towards Israel that may result in a fierce war.

3- The third explanation: What Qatar is doing is just humanitarian projects aimed at providing services to the Palestinian citizen in the Gaza Strip, especially that Qatar has

provided many projects to the Gaza Strip in previous years, most recently the construction of the Hamad Residential City.

6- The Kuwaiti position

Deputy Foreign Minister Khalid Al-Jarallah affirmed that Kuwait, both on the official and popular levels stand with the Palestinian people and leadership, whether through political or financial support. In a press release Al-Jarallah said that “Kuwait's position on the Palestinian cause, the main Arab issue, does not need hesitation at all.” He stressed the need to resolve the Palestinian issue on the basis of international legitimacy, the Arab peace initiative and the establishment of East [Jerusalem](#) as the capital of the state of Palestine.

It is therefore possible to say that the position of Kuwait, despite the state of estrangement that prevailed in the Kuwaiti-Palestinian relations following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, is the most obvious Arab and regional position; and perhaps the recent Kuwaiti positions on the Palestinian cause prove this.

Conclusion

Since September 2017, and the international community awaits Trump's disclosure of the “deal of the century”, although the proposals and contents that have been published and leaked so far can be described as loose and not realistic; and cannot be applied on the ground due to two factors:

First: the initial leaks on the current version of the deal, which is almost certainly not yet mature, are still in the stage of discussions in order to produce a final formula acceptable to the parties concerned.

Second: This factor is related to the timing of the deal: The US administration still suffers from internal problems. In addition, it is preoccupied with important external

files such as the dispute with Iran. Moreover, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and his wife are facing corruption charges. Finally, the Gaza Strip, which has suffered for 11 years from siege, remains strong, as confirmed by the return marches.

However, the above conclusion does not mean that the deal of the century has disappeared or failed; but the United States and some regional countries may resort to preparing the regional atmosphere for accepting a new or partial vision aimed at liquidating the Palestinian cause.

