

In 1919, Arthur James Balfour, the foreign secretary, wrote that in Palestine, the British government did not “propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country”. The great powers were committed to Zionism, he continued, “and Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land”.

In 2017, President Donald Trump recognised Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, saying: “We took Jerusalem off the table, so we don’t have to talk about it any more.” Trump told Benjamin Netanyahu: “You won one point, and you’ll give up some points later on in the negotiation, if it ever takes place.” The centre of the Palestinians’ history, identity, culture and worship was thus summarily disposed of without even the pretence of consulting their wishes. Then, in January 2020, the Trump administration finally unveiled its long awaited “deal” – once again without consultation with the Palestinians, the party most directly affected.

Throughout the intervening century, the great powers have repeatedly tried to act in spite of the Palestinians, ignoring them, talking for them, or over their heads, or pretending that they did not exist. In the face of the heavy odds against them, however, the Palestinians have shown a stubborn capacity to resist these efforts to eliminate them politically and scatter them to the four winds. Indeed, more than 120 years after the first Zionist congress in Basel and more than 70 years after the creation of [Israel](#), the Palestinian people, represented on neither of these occasions, were no longer supposed to constitute any kind of national presence. In their place was meant to stand a Jewish state, uncontested by the indigenous society that it was meant to supplant.

Yet today, for all its might, its nuclear weapons and its alliance with the US, the Jewish state is at least as globally contested as it was at any time in the past. The Palestinians’ resistance, their persistence and their challenge to Israel’s ambitions are among the most striking phenomena of the current era.

The war on Palestine passed the 100-year mark with the Palestinians confronting circumstances more daunting than perhaps at any time since 1917, the year of Balfour declaration, a statement from the British government announcing its support for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. With his election, Trump began pursuit of what he called “the deal of the century”, purportedly aimed at a conclusive resolution to the conflict. Closing the deal has so far involved dispensing with decades of bedrock US policies, outsourcing strategic planning to Israel and pouring contempt on the Palestinians. Inauspiciously, Trump’s ambassador to Israel, David Friedman (his bankruptcy lawyer and a longtime financial supporter of the Jewish settler movement), spoke of an “alleged occupation” and demanded that the state department stop using the term. In one

interview, he declared that Israel has the “right” to annex “some, but unlikely all, of the West Bank”. Jason Greenblatt, for more than two years envoy for Israel-Palestine negotiations (previously Trump’s real-estate lawyer and also a donor to Israeli rightwing causes), stated that West Bank settlements “are not an obstacle to peace”, rejected use of the term “occupation” in a meeting with EU envoys and endorsed Friedman’s views regarding annexation.

The new administration quickly trumpeted an “outside-in” approach, in which three of the Sunni Arab Gulf monarchies – Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Bahrain (often falsely described as representing Sunni Arabs) were brought into a de facto alliance with Israel to stand together against Iran. The byproduct of this configuration was that these and other Arab regimes allied to the US were encouraged to bully the Palestinians to accept maximalist Israeli positions that would be, and appeared intended to be, fatal to their cause. This initiative was coordinated closely with these regimes, via the mediation of presidential envoy extraordinaire Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law, also a real-estate mogul, and an ardent, extreme Zionist whose family had also donated to Jewish settlements.

In collusion with their Gulf partners at a June 2019 conference in Bahrain and in other venues, Kushner, Greenblatt and Friedman publicly pushed what was essentially an economic development initiative for the West Bank and Gaza Strip, meant to operate under existing conditions of virtually complete Israeli control. Kushner cast doubt on the feasibility of independent Palestinian self- rule, saying: “We’ll have to see.” He drew on the classic colonialist lexicon to add: “The hope is that they, over time, can become capable of governing.” All the Palestinians deserved, in Kushner’s view, was “the opportunity to live a better life ... the opportunity to pay their mortgage.” With their essentially economic solution, this troika displayed remarkable ignorance of a solid, expert consensus that the Palestinian economy has been strangled primarily by the systematic interference of the Israeli military occupation that their plan meant to keep in place. The Trump administration exacerbated this economic stranglehold by cutting off US aid to the Palestinian Authority and to The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The US also continued to support Israel’s blockade of [Gaza](#), aided by Egypt, with its disastrous effects on 1.8 million people.

The crucial political aspect of Trump’s deal of the century has now been revealed. It involves creating a non-contiguous, non-sovereign entity without removal of any of the existing illegal Israeli settlements, which are to be recognised, “legalised” and annexed to Israel, as is the Jordan River valley. This entity would be demilitarised and under full Israeli security control and therefore be a state in name only. It would exclude sovereignty or control over Jerusalem. It would be

located in the Gaza Strip and the scores of disparate fragments totalling under 40% of the West Bank, with some parts of the barren Negev desert to be included. No refugees would be allowed to return to Israel, and even their return to the Palestinian “state” would be “limited in accordance with agreed security arrangements” (ie: subject to Israeli control). The rest would be forced to stay where they are. Refugees might receive “some compensation”, while “compensation for lost assets” of Jewish refugees from Arab countries is explicitly mentioned. Clearly, in the eyes of Trump and his team, Palestinians’ stolen assets, including the bulk of the land of Palestine that was (and legally still is) their property, are not on the same level as the assets of Jewish refugees from Arab countries. This is one of many indications that for Trump et al, the Palestinians are on a different, lower level of humanity and are simply not entitled to the same rights and privileges as Israelis.

Integrally linked to this approach was Trump’s December 2017 recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and the subsequent relocation of the US embassy there. This move marked a revolutionary departure from over 70 years of US policy, going back to [UNGA 181](#), the resolution passed by the UN in 1947 that called for the partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. Under this, the status of the holy city was to remain undetermined pending a final resolution of the Palestine question to be mutually agreed by both sides. This affront was then followed by Trump’s proclamation recognising Israeli sovereignty over the annexed Golan Heights, another radical US policy shift.

With these two pronouncements, the administration unilaterally took issues – one of which, that of Jerusalem, Israel is treaty-bound to negotiate with the Palestinians – off the table. As well as reversing decades of US policy, the Trump ensemble spurned an entire body of international law and consensus, UN security council decisions, world opinion and, of course, Palestinian rights. Trump accepted fully Israel’s stand on the vital issue of Jerusalem and did so without any quid pro quo from Israel and without any acknowledgment of Palestinian demands for recognition of the city as the capital of Palestine. Equally important, by implication, Trump endorsed Israel’s expansive definition of a “unified Jerusalem”, including the extensive Arab areas in and around the city appropriated by Israel since 1967’s six-day war. Although the administration stated that actual borders were still to be negotiated, its proclamation meant, in effect, that there was nothing left to negotiate.

Through these and other actions, the White House signalled the outlines of the US-Israeli proposal: it explicitly avoided endorsing a real two-state solution; it closed the Palestinian mission in Washington DC and the US consulate in East Jerusalem that had served as an informal embassy to the Palestinians; it claimed that, contrary to the status of all other refugees since the second world war, the descendants of Palestinians, declared refugees in 1948, are not themselves

refugees. Finally, by endorsing Israel's annexation of Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, Trump cleared the way for the annexation of whatever parts of the occupied West Bank Israel should choose to swallow up.

In exchange for these drastic derogations of Palestinian rights, the Palestinians were to be offered money, collected from the Gulf monarchies. The offer was formalised at the June 2019 conference in Bahrain that the authority refused to attend. Kushner's proposal to buy off Palestinian opposition to a plan that obviated a negotiated political settlement was in fact no more than a reheated version of similar plans for "economic peace" in lieu of rights peddled by Israeli leaders from Shimon Peres to Netanyahu. For Netanyahu and ultranationalist supporters of extremist settlers, an economic sweetener for the bitter pill the Palestinians were meant to swallow had become an essential plank in their explicitly annexationist approach.

Indeed, what was most striking about this White House's Middle East policy was that it had been effectively outsourced to Netanyahu and his allies in Israel and the US. Its initiatives seem to have come prepackaged from the Israeli right's storehouse of ideas: moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, recognising the annexation of the Golan, airily dispensing with the Palestinian refugee issue, trying to liquidate UNRWA and withdrawing from the Obama-era nuclear agreement with Iran. Only a few items remained on Netanyahu's wish list: annexation of much of the West Bank, formal US rejection of sovereign Palestinian statehood, the creation of a toothless Palestinian Quisling leadership – the entire package meant to coerce the Palestinians to accept that they are a defeated people.

None of this was entirely new, given past US practice. But Trump's people abandoned even the shabby old pretence at impartiality. With this plan, the US ceased to be "Israel's lawyer", becoming instead the mouthpiece of the most extreme government in Israel's history, proposing to negotiate directly with the Palestinians on Israel's behalf, with the welcome assistance of its closest Arab allies. Perhaps the White House was up to something else: generating draft proposals that were so offensively pro-Israel as to be unacceptable to even the most compliant Palestinians. With this tactic, the Israeli government could paint the Palestinians as rejectionist and continue to avoid negotiations while maintaining the status quo of creeping annexation, expanding colonisation and legal discrimination. In either case, the outcome would be the same: the Palestinians were put on notice that the prospect of an independent future in their homeland was closed off, and that the Israeli colonial endeavour had a free hand to shape Palestine as it wished.

This is a conclusion that most of the world rejects, and it will surely be met with resistance, both locally and globally. It is also at odds with every principle of

freedom, justice and equality that the US is supposed to stand for. A resolution imposed strictly on harsh Israeli terms will inevitably bring more conflict and insecurity for all concerned. For the Palestinians, though, it also presents opportunities.

The existing strategies of both of the leading Palestinian political factions, Fatah and Hamas, have come to nothing, evidenced by the acceleration of Israeli control over all of Palestine. Neither dependence on US mediation in fruitless negotiations as part of the sole resort to feeble diplomacy of the Abbas era (Mahmoud Abbas has been president of Palestine since 2005), nor a nominal strategy of armed resistance has advanced Palestinian national aims over the past few decades. Nor is there much for the Palestinians to expect from Arab regimes such as those of Egypt and Jordan, which today have no shame in signing massive gas deals with Israel or Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have purchased Israeli weapons and security systems through US cut-outs that only thinly disguise their origins.

These realisations necessitate a careful reassessment by the Palestinians of their methods, whether their national goals are defined as an end to occupation and reversing the colonisation of Palestinian land; establishing a Palestinian state in the remaining 22% of Mandatory Palestine, the geopolitical entity established in 1920 until the creation of the State Israel in 1948, with Arab East Jerusalem as its capital; the return to their ancestral homeland of that half of the Palestinian people who are currently living in exile; or creating a democratic, sovereign binational state in all of Palestine with equal rights for all, or some combination or permutation of these options. As the weaker party in the conflict, the Palestinian side cannot afford to remain divided. But before unity can be achieved, a redefinition of objectives must take place on the basis of a new national consensus.

It is a searing indictment of both Fatah and Hamas that in recent decades, civil society initiatives such as the [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions](#) (BDS) movement and student activism have done more to further the Palestine cause than anything either of these two main factions has undertaken.

A reconciliation would at least repair some of the damage caused by their split, but reconciliation between two ideologically bankrupt political movements, important though it would be, cannot provide the dynamic new strategy needed to dislodge the Palestinian cause from its current state of stagnation and retreat.

One key change that is needed involves acknowledging that the diplomatic strategy adopted by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) since the 80s

was fatally flawed: the US is not and cannot be a mediator, a broker or a neutral party. It has long opposed Palestinian national aspirations and has formally committed itself to support the Israeli government's positions on Palestine. The Palestinian national movement must recognise the true nature of the US stance and undertake dedicated grassroots political and informational work to make its case inside the US, as the Zionist movement has done for more than a century. This task will not necessarily take generations, given the significant shifts that have already occurred in key sectors of public opinion. There is a great deal to build on.

Yet the bifurcated Palestinian leadership appears to have no better understanding of the workings of US society and politics than its predecessors had. It does not have any idea of how to engage with American public opinion and has made no serious attempt to do so. This ignorance of the complex nature of the US political system has prevented the fashioning of a sustained programme to reach potentially sympathetic elements of civil society. By contrast, in spite of the dominant position Israel and its supporters enjoy in the US, they continue to expend lavish resources to advance their cause in the public arena. Although the effort to support Palestinian rights is poorly funded and has been comprised only of initiatives by elements of civil society, it has achieved remarkable successes in such spheres as the arts (notably cinema and theatre); the legal realm, where defenders of free speech and the first amendment have become vital allies against sustained attacks on supporters of BDS; sectors of academia, notably Middle East and American studies; some unions and churches; and key parts of the base of the Democratic party.

Similar work needs to be directed at Europe, Russia, India, China, Brazil and non-aligned states. Israel has made progress in recent years in cultivating the elites and public opinion in these countries, while many of them, especially China and India, are becoming more active in the Middle East. Although most Arab states are controlled by undemocratic regimes subservient to the US and desirous of Israeli approval, Arab public opinion remains acutely sensitive to the appeal of Palestine. Thus in 2016, 75% of respondents in 12 Arab countries considered the Palestine cause one of concern to all Arabs, and 86% disapproved of Arab recognition of Israel because of its policies directed against Palestine. The Palestinians need to resurrect the PLO's former strategy of appealing over the heads of unresponsive regimes to sympathetic Arab public opinion.

Most important is that should entering negotiations based on a Palestinian consensus become feasible, any future diplomacy must reject the Oslo interim formula and proceed on an entirely different basis. An intensive global public relations and diplomatic campaign must be aimed at demanding international sponsorship and rejecting exclusive US control of the process (a demand that has already been feebly made by the authority). Beyond this, for the purpose of

negotiations, the Palestinians ought to treat the US as an extension of Israel. As a superpower, it would necessarily be represented at any talks, but it should be considered as an adversarial party, even seated with Israel on the opposite side of the table, which would represent its real position, at least since 1967.

New negotiations would need to reopen all the crucial issues created by the 1948 war that were closed in Israel's favour in 1967 by UNSC 242: the 1947 UNGA 181 partition borders and its *corpus separatum* proposal for Jerusalem; the return and compensation of refugees; and the political, national and civil rights of Palestinians inside Israel. Such talks should stress complete equality of treatment of both peoples, and be based on The Hague and fourth Geneva convention, the UN Charter with its stress on national self-determination, and all relevant UN security council and general assembly resolutions, not just those cherry-picked by the US to favour Israel.

The current administration in Washington and the Israeli government would, of course, never accept such terms, and so these would, for the moment, constitute impossible preconditions for negotiations. That is precisely the point. They are meant to move the goalposts away from formulas devised as advantageous to Israel. Continuing to negotiate on the existing deeply flawed basis can only entrench a status quo that is leading toward the final absorption of Palestine into the Greater Land of Israel. If a serious and sustained Palestinian diplomatic and public relations effort campaigned for such new terms aimed at reaching a just and equitable peace, many countries would be amenable to considering them. They might even be willing to challenge the half-century-long US monopoly on peacemaking, a monopoly that been crucial in preventing peace in Palestine.

A forgotten but essential element of the Palestinian political agenda is work inside Israel, specifically convincing Israelis that there is an alternative to the ongoing oppression of the Palestinians. This is a long-term process that cannot be dismissed as a form of "normalising" relations with Israel: neither the Algerians nor the Vietnamese shortsightedly denied themselves the opportunity to convince public opinion in the home country of their oppressor of the justice of their cause – efforts that contributed measurably to their victory. Nor should the Palestinians.

The Palestinian people, whose resistance to colonialism has involved an uphill battle, should not expect quick results. They have shown unusual patience, perseverance, and steadfastness in defending their rights, which is the main reason that their cause is still alive. It is now essential for all the elements in Palestinian society to adopt a considered, long-term strategy, which means rethinking much that has been done in the past, understanding how other liberation movements succeeded in altering an unfavourable balance of forces, and cultivating all possible allies in their struggle.

Given an Arab world that is in a state of disarray greater than at any time since the end of the first world war and a Palestinian national movement that appears to be without a compass, it might seem that this is an opportune moment for Israel and the US to collude with their autocratic Arab partners to bury the Palestine question, dispose of the Palestinians and declare victory. It is not likely to be quite so simple. There is the not inconsiderable matter of the Arab public, who can be fooled some of the time, but not all of the time, and emerges with Palestinian flags flying whenever democratic currents rise against autocracy, as in Cairo in 2011 and in Algiers in the spring of 2019. Israel's regional hegemony depends, in very large measure, on the maintenance in power of undemocratic Arab regimes that will suppress such sentiment. However distant it may seem today, real democracy in the Arab world would be a grave threat to Israel's regional dominance and freedom of action.

Just as important, there is also the popular resistance that the Palestinians can be expected to continue to mount, whatever the shabby deal to which their discredited leaders may mistakenly assent. Though Israel is the nuclear regional hegemon, its domination is not uncontested in the Middle East, nor is the legitimacy of the undemocratic Arab regimes which are increasingly becoming its clients. Finally, the US, for all its power, has played a secondary role – sometimes no role at all – in the crises in Syria, Yemen, Libya and elsewhere in the region. It will not necessarily maintain the near-monopoly over the Palestine question, and indeed over the entire Middle East, that it has enjoyed for so long.

Configurations of global power have been changing: based on their growing energy needs; China and India will have more to say about the Middle East in the 21st century than they did in the previous one. Being closer to the Middle East, Europe and Russia have been more affected than the US by the instability there, and can be expected to play larger roles. The US will most likely not continue to have the free hand that Britain once did. Perhaps such changes will allow Palestinians, together with Israelis and others worldwide who wish for peace and stability with justice in Palestine, to craft a different trajectory than that of oppression of one people by another. Only such a path based on equality and justice is capable of concluding the 100 years' war on Palestine with a lasting peace – one that brings with it the liberation the Palestinian people deserve.