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A Thief's Mentality: Trump, Real Estate and Dreams of Ethnic Cleansing



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President Donald J. Trump likes teasing out the unmentionable, and the Israel-Palestinian situation was hardly going to be any different. With a touch of horror and the grotesque, he offered a solution to the issue of what would happen to Gaza at the conclusion of hostilities. In a White House press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he declared that the United States “take over and own the Gaza Strip”, in the process promising to “create an economic development that will supply an unlimited number of jobs and housing for people of the area.”

The strip, one of the most densely populated stretches of territory on the planet, would be reconstructed, redeveloped and turned, effectively, into a beach resort, “the Riviera of the Middle East.” Here was the double battering being dished out to an impoverished, tormented, tortured population: not only would any aspiration of political independence and

Palestinian sovereignty be terminated, it would reach its terminus in the form of tourist capitalism and real estate transactions.

This development idea in Trumpland is not new. In October 2024, the then Republican presidential candidate told a radio interviewer that Gaza could be “better than Monaco”, provided it was built in the appropriate way. His son-in-law, Jared Kushner, conceded at an event held at Harvard in February last year that “waterfront property” in Gaza “could be very valuable”. Israel, he proposed, could “move the people out and then clean it up”.

The logistics of the plan remain inscrutable. Trump does not envisage using US troops in the endeavour (“No soldiers by the US would be needed!”), but Israel’s defence minister Israel Katz has already ordered the military to draft plans for Palestinians wishing to “voluntarily” leave. With heaped upon praise, Katz thought the plan would “allow a large population in Gaza to leave for various places in the world” via land crossings, sea and air. He also suggested that the Palestinians find abodes in such countries as Spain and Norway, countries critical of Israel’s war efforts. For those countries not to accept them would expose “their hypocrisy”.

Netanyahu, for his part, saw Trump’s Gaza plan as “completely different”, offering a “much better vision for Israel”. It would open “up many, many possibilities for us.” He was particularly delighted by the notion that Gazans could leave. “The actual idea of allowing Gazans who want to leave – I mean, what’s wrong with that?” he told Fox News. “They can leave, they can then come back.” Informed cynicism hardly permits such a view to be taken seriously, and a number of Israeli politicians would simply see such departures as a prelude to rebuilding Jewish settlements.

On Truth Social, Trump insisted that Palestinians would be duly “resettled in far safer and more beautiful communities, with new and modern homes, in the region.” Where in the region he does not say. He also makes no mention of Hamas as an obstacle, a group Israel has failed to eliminate despite various lofty claims.

For those in Congress, and for allies of the United States to agree with this, would be tantamount to signing off on a gross violation of international law. The phenomenon of ethnic cleansing, so aggressively evident in the redrawing of boundaries in Europe and the Indian subcontinent after the Second World War, came, in time, to be seen as a category almost as heinous as genocide.

It did not take too long for the human rights advocates to see through the plan’s inherent nastiness. To displace Palestinians from Gaza, argued Navi Pillay, chair of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, could not be seen as

anything other than proposed ethnic cleansing. “Trump is woefully ignorant of international law and the law of occupation. Forcible displacement of an occupied group is an international crime, and amounts to ethnic cleansing,” she explained to POLITICO.

Other states that are expected to have some say in the political arrangements of post-war Gaza have been, in various measures, cold and aghast at the proposal. Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Ministry, for instance, stated that Palestinian statehood “is not the subject of negotiation or concessions”. Columnist Hamoud Abu Taleb, writing for *Okaz*, suggested that Trump believed “that countries are no different from his Mar-a-Lago resort and can be taken over in deals, and if necessary, by force.”

The attitude from certain Palestinians returning to their ruined homes captured the sentiment most acutely of all. Muhammad Abdel Majeed, a man in his mid-30s who returned to northern Gaza to find the family home in Jabalia refugee camp pulverised, felt that Trump was operating with “a thief’s mentality”. It was one that placed investments and money before “a person’s right to a decent life”.

Thieving it may well be, but the Trump formula may simply be a provocation designed to draw upon Arab involvement. A bluff is a possibility, insofar as a threat to occupy or displace the residents of Gaza prompts Arab states to supply forces while also considering the process of normalisation with Israel.

Much in law entails the twist and the crack that turns a benign expression into something sinister. It can also render the sinister benign. While greeted as “innovative” and an inducement for other states to put forth their own Gaza proposals, to execute with any seriousness a measure to displace a whole, brutalised population would not only be criminal but a further incitement to violence. It hardly matters that such violence will be exercised by Hamas or some successor organisation. What matters is that it will take place with relentless, retributive tenacity.

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