



## Trump's "Ultimate Deal" on Palestine/Israel

By Tamara Kharroub

December 7, 2016

In the first interview after his election victory, Donald J. Trump [told](#) *The Wall Street Journal* that he wants to broker a deal between Israel and the Palestinians. "That's the ultimate deal," he said. "As a deal maker, I'd like to do... the deal that can't be made. And do it for humanity's sake."

But less than 48 hours after his victory, President-elect Trump invited Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to visit the United States "at the first opportunity" in what was [described](#) as a "warm, heartfelt conversation." Netanyahu was quick to release a statement congratulating the president-elect and asserting the "ironclad bond" between Israel and the United States and his confidence in its growth under the Trump administration. In turn, rightwing voices in Israel rejoiced declaring the end of the two-state solution and the beginning of an era that will advance moving the US embassy to Jerusalem.

So, what is this "ultimate deal" that Trump plans to make?

### Breakthroughs and U-Turns

Early on during his campaign, Trump promised to be "neutral" and hinted that Israel carries the burden of the failure of the peace process. "A lot will have to do with Israel and whether or not Israel wants to make the deal—whether or not Israel's willing to sacrifice certain things," he said. Trump also expressed doubts about the billions of dollars of US military aid to Israel. He backed traditional US policy toward the two-state solution and refused to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, saying instead that he would "wait until I meet with Bibi," which did not happen.

With an unconventional Republican candidate like Donald Trump departing from traditional campaign talking points on Israel, and with Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary race speaking about Palestinian rights and urging "evenhandedness" toward the issue, it seemed that US policy might finally be undergoing a radical change with regard to Palestine/Israel. But this perception did not last very long.

The AIPAC conference in March 2016 was a turning point for Trump, where he competed with fervent pro-Israel and neocon candidates for Jewish Republican financial support and endorsement. In his prepared speech, which he delivered uncharacteristically using teleprompters, Trump described himself as a "lifelong supporter and true friend of Israel." He also said, "We will move the American embassy to the eternal capital of the Jewish people, Jerusalem." He described president Obama as the "worst thing to ever happen to Israel" and said he would veto any UN Security Council resolution regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, further calling the UN "not a friend of democracy" and "not a friend to Israel."

This pro-Israel show culminated in the Republican Party platform, which avoids any mention of the two-state solution and states that “Support for Israel is an expression of Americanism.... We reject the false notion that Israel is an occupier.” Trump consequently tweeted proudly that the platform is the “most pro-Israel of all time!”

On the Democratic Party side, Hillary Clinton won her party’s nomination, sidelining progressive voices in the party. Although Bernie Sanders managed to include prominent supporters of Palestinian rights in the platform drafting committee, and despite several concessions made to the Sanders camp on different issues, the Democratic Party platform maintained pro-Israel language. As a result, the platform does not call for an end to the occupation, does not mention settlements, and expresses clear opposition to the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

The US political system is now back to business as usual, at least when it comes to Israel. Trump’s U-turn represents typical elections campaign rhetoric on Israel. But the question remains whether Trump will act upon such promises.

### **Jerusalem, Settlements, and Palestinian Statehood**

Following Trump’s victory, reactions from Israel praised the president-elect and celebrated the prospects for three main developments: more settlements, Jerusalem as Israel’s undivided capital, and the end of the two-state solution.

Israel’s education minister, rightwing Naftali Bennett, announced, “The era of the Palestinian state is over,” while Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat said he is confident that Trump’s victory means that the United States will move its embassy to Jerusalem. Israeli infrastructure minister Yuval Steinitz predicted that settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem will expand as President-elect Trump, unlike his predecessor, is expected to turn a blind eye to new settlement construction. Following Trump’s victory, 7,000 new settlement units in the West Bank were approved, the construction of which was [reportedly](#) prevented by pressure and fear of backlash from the Obama administration.

On the president-elect’s side, the most vocal spokespersons have been Trump’s two Israel advisors, whom the Trump campaign announced in April 2016: Trump’s bankruptcy lawyer David Friedman and the Trump Organization’s chief legal officer, Jason Greenblatt. Friedman and Greenblatt co-chair the Trump campaign’s Israel Advisory Committee and are both fervent supporters of illegal Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territory.

Regarding Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and the two-state solution, Friedman [said](#) in a radio interview on November 7 that Trump is “the most pro-Israel candidate this nation has seen.” He said that Trump’s positions are similar to his in opposing a Palestinian

state and supporting Israel's annexation of the West Bank. Greenblatt also [said](#) in an interview with Israel's Army Radio that the president-elect does not think Israeli settlements should be condemned or that they are an obstacle to peace.

In an interview after his election win with *Israel HaYom*, the newspaper owned by Sheldon Adelson (the pro-Israel casino mogul bankrolling Republican presidential candidates), Trump [said](#) that any agreement “must be negotiated between the parties themselves, and not imposed on them by others. Israel and the Jewish people deserve no less,” suggesting that he might block any efforts by the international community or at the United Nations Security Council.

Israeli settlements in the West Bank are illegal under international law and the official US position clearly considers Israeli land grabs and construction inside the 1967 green line as an obstacle to peace and to the US-supported two-state solution. The Obama administration has been strongly opposed to settlement construction and expansion, and President Obama himself has condemned Israeli settlement activity on several occasions. However, the president-elect still believes settlements are not an obstacle to peace, all the while announcing that he wants to broker a peace deal.

On the issue of Jerusalem, Trump promised to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which would signal American recognition of the city as Israel's capital. After Trump's victory, Friedman [reportedly](#) said that the US-Israel relationship will be “better than ever” and that Trump will keep his promise of moving the US embassy to Jerusalem.

Although Trump said he would move the US embassy to Jerusalem, which reflects the mainstream Republican rhetoric, the official position of the United States is more cautious. US administrations, both Republican and Democratic, have perceived Jerusalem as a disputed area and stated that the future status of Jerusalem can only be resolved by negotiations. For the last 20 years, US policymakers have waived any proposed legislation to move the embassy. Even Obama as a presidential candidate in 2008 said in his AIPAC speech that Jerusalem should be the undivided capital of Israel, but he did not follow through and had to make a correction later. Israel's Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman himself recognized the promise as part of election campaign rhetoric. “We've seen this promise in every election,” he [said](#) at the Saban Forum on December 2, 2016. Lieberman played down the issue, citing Iran, Syria, and settlements as more crucial issues. “I think that it will be a mistake to take the embassy as the focal point,” he said. “It's very important but we have other issues.” The move, and subsequent recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, is an explosive matter not only for Palestinians, but for Arabs and Muslims at large.

Whether either of the chairmen of Trump's Israel Advisory Committee will have a place in the White House is still unknown, but they both have assured the media that Trump will follow

through on his recent promises to Israel.

### **The Trump Administration**

When taking a closer look at Trump's cabinet as it begins to take shape, the picture becomes clearer.

So far, Trump has made rightwing, hawkish, and Islamophobic nominations for senior positions in his administration, from alt-right Steven Bannon, named as chief White House strategist, to his choice as national security advisor of Mike Flynn, who described Islam as a "malignant cancer" that has "metastasized."

Trump also named James "Mad Dog" Mattis for secretary of defense. Although Mattis [said](#) at an Aspen Institute conference in July 2013 that the United States pays the price of being biased in favor of Israel and that settlement construction leads Israel to "apartheid," he is known for remarking that "it's fun to shoot people" in Afghanistan. Mattis may disagree with Trump and his Israel advisors regarding Israeli settlements and Palestinian statehood, but a statement by the pro-Israel Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), released on November 27, 2016, [confirms](#) that Mattis's outlook "aligns perfectly with Israel's."

The position of secretary of state is likely the most crucial position when it comes to US policy toward Israel/Palestine. The front runners so far all share a strong opposition to Palestinian statehood and generally espouse pro-Israel stances. In 2011, Rudy Giuliani said, "Somebody has to question why are we creating a Palestinian state that's going to be another terrorist state," while approving comments by Newt Gingrich that the Palestinians were an "invented people." John Bolton said the two-state solution is not viable and proposed a "three-state solution" where Palestinians would be transferred to Egypt and Jordan. Although David Petraeus said in 2010 that US bias toward Israel provokes anti-American sentiment, his current positions are not clear. Mitt Romney is well known for his pro-Israel positions; during his presidential campaign in 2011 and 2012, he said that as president he will do what is "recommended and supported by Israeli leaders." Romney, who received millions in campaign donations from Sheldon Adelson, traveled to Israel during his campaign and held a fundraiser in Jerusalem, indicating commitment to Israel. Finally, Bob Corker's voting record, resolutions, and letters as senator show vigorous support for Israel.

How much Trump's advisors, senior cabinet members, and secretary of state will influence Trump's positions remains to be seen. However, Trump seems to be moving along two pathways.

### **The Trump Approach: Minimalism vs. Maximalism**

Based on what we know so far, there are two possible pathways that the Trump administration will take on the Palestinian-Israeli issue: one of isolationism and another of strong support for Israel.

On one hand, some analysts and observers still believe that “Trump is Trump”; he has no deep commitment to Israel and his positions and expected policies are still unclear. Even Israeli foreign ministry officials [expressed](#) concern in a leaked statement following Trump’s victory, maintaining that Trump has “minimal interest in foreign affairs” and that he “doesn’t see the Middle East as a good investment and it’s reasonable to assume he will seek to reduce American involvement in the region.”

On the other hand, Trump’s Israel advisors and the senior administration officials he nominated so far represent the maximalist position, supporting settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, opposing Palestinian statehood, and calling to move the US embassy to Jerusalem.

While continuously asserting his “love” for Israel, Trump said he wants to make the “ultimate deal” between Israel and the Palestinians. At the same time, he [said](#) on November 22 that his Jewish son-in-law Jared Kushner could make the deal. Kushner, a 35-year-old real estate investor and newspaper owner, is said to have crafted Trump’s pro-Israel speech at AIPAC. In addition, the Kushner family foundation is reported to have donated thousands of dollars to West Bank settlements and he is said to have donated another thousands to AIPAC.

To recap, whereas Israeli settlements in the West Bank are illegal under international law and the official US position supports a two-state solution along the 1967 green line, the president-elect believes settlements are not an obstacle to peace and wants to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, all the while announcing that his pro-Israel son-in-law will to make the “ultimate deal” between Israel and the Palestinians.

Trump’s statements show clear incoherence, lack of specifics, and little understanding of the complexity of issues involved. Nevertheless, whether Trump uses a minimalist or a maximalist approach, the result will be the same: increased settlement construction and expansion in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and blocking any prospects for a Palestinian state.

Although it is yet unclear whether US policymakers and Trump’s cabinet will avoid moving the US embassy to Jerusalem and recognizing it as Israel’s capital, if Trump is the unconventional president he is expected to be, then the move might actually be the “ultimate deal” he has been talking about.