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Trump's Middle East plan

“Deal of the century”: Trump endorses apartheid, Israel applauds

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The “Trump plan” for the Middle East, pompously dubbed the “Deal of the Century”, immediately appeared for what it was: a plan to recognize a colonial fait accompli, with complete alignment on the positions of the Israeli right. The fact that it was rejected by all Palestinian forces and by the Arab League is not a surprise, as the content of this “plan” is outrageously favourable to Israel and tramples on all Palestinian national rights. It remains to be seen what consequences Trump’s proposals could have, more than 26 years after the Oslo Agreement, launched with great fanfare, of the “peace process” - whose bankruptcy is well established.

The Trump plan presents itself as a comprehensive framework to serve as the basis for the drafting and signing of an “Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement” putting an end to the “conflict”. Unlike the Oslo Accords, which presented themselves as “interim agreements” opening a period of five years which were to lead to “final status negotiations”, the Trump plan is therefore intended to be the basis of a text of definitive agreement, and that is why it claims to respond to almost all of the problems of the “conflict”: the colonies (designated as “settlements”, in accordance with the Israeli term), the borders, Jerusalem, the prisoners, the refugees and so on. And the least we can say is that, unlike the “Declaration of Principles” of September 1993 - which gave rise to the handshake between Arafat and Rabin on the lawn of the White House - and the interim texts which had followed, which carefully circumvented all the crucial questions and/or were content with vague formulas, the Trump plan has the merit of clarity.

International law?

With regard to the United Nations resolutions, which, from the point of view of international law, are supposed to frame any political settlement of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the message could not be more clear: “Since 1946, there have been close to 700 United Nations General Assembly resolutions and over 100 United Nations Security Council resolutions in connection with this conflict. United Nations resolutions are sometimes inconsistent and sometimes time-bound. These resolutions have not brought about peace. Furthermore, different parties have offered conflicting interpretations of some of the most significant United Nations resolutions, including United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. [1] Indeed, legal scholars who have worked directly on critical United Nations resolutions have differed on their meaning and legal effect. While we are respectful of the historic role of the United Nations in the peace process, this Vision is not a recitation of General Assembly, Security Council and other international resolutions on this topic because such resolutions have not and will not resolve the conflict. For too long these resolutions have enabled political leaders to avoid addressing the complexities of this conflict rather than enabling a realistic path to peace”.

A very Trumpian stance vis-à-vis international law and institutions, perfectly in line with Israeli positions. The “political leaders” targeted are indeed obviously not the Israeli leaders, for whom the UN resolutions have never been any reference, but the Palestinians (and their supporters), who regularly recall the existence of these texts establishing their rights. And for good reason! Even if we have no sympathy for the UN and no fetishism for international law, it must be noted, as the Belgian lawyer François Dubuisson reminds us (Facebook, 29th January, 2020), that these resolutions indeed set out the following principles: “right of the Palestinian people to self-determination; Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem considered “occupied Palestinian territories”; illegality of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory; obligation for Israel to withdraw from the territories occupied during the June 1967 war; the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes or the right to just compensation; the right of all states in the region to live within secure and recognized borders; condemnation of violence, whether Israeli or Palestinian.” These principles are absolutely not found in Trump's “Vision”, much to the contrary.

Bantustans

If we look, for example, at issues of territory, things are again very clear: the Palestinian “state” proposed by Trump consists of small pieces of territory, fragmented, without continuity and often without contiguity, which inevitably bring to mind the Bantustans of apartheid in South Africa. These territories form an archipelago in an Israeli ocean, with a single direct “border” with another state, Egypt (in Gaza), over which Israel would have a right of oversight by means of “specific arrangements” with Egypt. The plan mentions “an innovative network of roads, bridges and tunnels promoting the freedom of movement of the Palestinians” between the Bantustans, each entry and exit of which would be controlled by Israel. The State of Israel, meanwhile, would annex - among other things - the settlement blocs and the Jordan Valley, more than 40% of the West Bank, most of the fertile land and water supplies, with - obviously - territorial continuity. We can read in the plan that “to withdraw from territories seized during a defensive war [sic] is a historical rarity” and that the fact that Israel has already withdrawn from a part of them is a “significant concession”. No comment. Note that the word “occupation” does not appear once in the 181 pages of the Trump plan.

As for Jerusalem, no surprises either: “Jerusalem will remain the capital of the state of Israel and will remain an undivided city.” In line with the decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem in November 2017, which is completely contradictory to international law, the Trump plan therefore confirms the irreversible nature of the annexation of the city. And goes a step further by asserting that it is for the state of Israel to ensure the protection of all the holy places, and therefore to exercise full sovereignty thereof. As ultimate provocation, the text specifies that “the sovereign capital of the State of Palestine may be in the part of East Jerusalem located in the areas east and north of the current security barrier [the wall], including Kafr Aqab, the eastern part of Shufat and Abu Dis, and may be named al-Quds [Jerusalem in Arabic] or another name chosen by the state of Palestine.” In other words, the Palestinians will be able to rename cities and towns named Jerusalem and make it their capital, even though they are barely on the outskirts of the city. Kafr Aqab, for example, is closer to the centre of Ramallah than to that of Jerusalem.

A humiliation for the Palestinians

Alignment with Israeli positions is therefore total, and the same applies to other issues. Regarding refugees, it is stated that “[there will be neither the right to return nor the absorption of a single Palestinian refugee in Israel”. The Arab states are ordered to integrate the refugees and, if the latter are invited to “return” to the future “state” of Palestine - while they claim the return to their lands located today in Israel - it is on the condition that this “return” is regulated by a joint Israeli-Palestinian committee. In other words, in the light of the experience of the “joint committees” established after the Oslo Accords, the United States offers Israel the possibility of opposing the entry of refugees at any time into territory that is not supposed to be theirs. It is the same “philosophy” that guides the Trump plan on the question of Palestinian prisoners (who are now almost 5,000, according to figures from the Israeli NGO B'Tselem), with drastic restrictions on releases and conditioning any release for signature by prisoners “of a commitment to promote, in their community, the benefits of coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians, and to conduct themselves in a way that values coexistence. Prisoners who refuse to sign this pledge will remain incarcerated.”

And we could further extend the list of outrages contained in Trump's "Vision", from the demand for a fully demilitarized Palestinian “state” to the maintenance of Israeli control over airspace, including the promises of injection of billions of dollars into the Palestinian territories on the condition that the latter definitively renounce all their rights. Notable element: the Trump plan not only confirms the status of Israel as the “nation state of the Jewish people”, but also advocates the forced “transfer” of 260,000 Palestinians citizens of Israel, whose cities and towns would become a Bantustan under Palestinian administration. All in all, the “Deal of the century” is nothing more than a real slap in the face for the Palestinians, including the most “moderate” of them, like the leadership of the Palestinian Authority

(PA) in Ramallah, for whom the humiliation is total. While Netanyahu and his rival Benny Gantz applauded Trump's proposals - which confirms that what is at stake in the Israeli parliamentary elections of 2 March 2 is absolutely not policy towards the Palestinians - Abbas and his Prime Minister rejected them en bloc. A few days later, Abbas even announced the breakdown of relations with Israel, including in the area of security cooperation. It remains to be seen whether these announcements will be followed up, as the political-administrative apparatus that is the PA is dependent, including and particularly on the economic level, on its relations with Israel, with the latter paying the PA several hundred million euros every year with respect to VAT and customs duties levied on products imported by Palestinians, which is necessary for the PA budget, notably to pay civil servants.

Trump plan finishes Oslo process

One thing is certain, however: the Trump plan is certainly rejected by the Palestinians, but it will serve as a guarantee for an acceleration of Israeli colonial policies, in particular with a rapid annexation of the settlement blocs and the Jordan Valley, already discussed in the Knesset's corridors. Decisions that will further confirm a reality that some continue to refuse to see, like France, which, in reaction to the Trump plan, was content to recall its attachment to the “two-state solution” : there is, in fact, only one state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan, which tolerates within it some “autonomous zones”, insofar as these are not factors of destabilization. That these “autonomous zones” be renamed “state of Palestine” in a US document, does not change the case, quite the contrary. And it would be particularly difficult to want to “hang on” to the Oslo process initiated in 1993-1994, which the Trump plan has in fact just finished, in both senses of the word: Oslo was nothing but a reorganization of the Israeli occupation system, with an evacuation of the most densely populated Palestinian areas, entrusted to the administration of the Palestinian Authority, the latter being, on an economic infusion, responsible for maintaining order while Israel continued its colonial policy claiming to be part of a negotiated logic. [2]

The failure of Oslo as a “peace process” is not the story of missed opportunities, bad choices or unwillingness on the part of either or both of the actors. The failure of Oslo is the programmed failure of a process by which an attempt was made to force the Palestinians to renounce their rights in the name of an illusory autonomy and a transfer of part of the powers and prerogatives of the colonial administration to an indigenous administration without real sovereignty. The Trump plan thus completes the Oslo process, if it is understood to be a process of reorganizing the occupation and not a peace process. It remains to be seen whether the new step that Israel is preparing to take with the encouragement of the United States will force the dying and crisis-ridden Palestinian National Movement to take the “big leap” and to carry out a repeatedly made threat: announcing the dissolution, at least political, of the Palestinian Authority, an essential step to end the fiction of “autonomy” or of the Palestinian “proto-state”, and to put Israel before its responsibilities as occupying power. A decision which, far from settling everything, would at least participate in the redefinition of the terms of the conflict and would open the possibility of a long-term overhaul of the national movement, including all Palestinian forces, around the objectives of liberation, and not management of a pseudo state apparatus. Given the current situation and the decaying state of the Palestinian movement, such prospects may sound like wishful thinking. But there is little doubt, however, that the page for the struggle “for an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel at the end of a negotiated process” is definitely turned, and that the Palestinians will need a powerful movement of international solidarity in their fight against the Israeli apartheid regime.

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[1] Resolution 242, adopted after the Six Day War in June 1967, requires Israeli withdrawal from the territories conquered by force (West Bank, Gaza, Syrian Golan, Egyptian Sinai). But whereas, in its French version, it requests withdrawal of the Israeli armed forces from “the territories occupied”, the English version refers to “territories occupied” without the definite article. Israel has always claimed, in splendid international isolation, that it is only the English version that it conforms to.

[2] See on this Julien Salingue, 13 September 2013 [“Oslo, 20 ans après : il n'y a jamais eu de processus de paix”](#).