

# The 'Deal of the Century' or the 'Bluff of the Millennium'?

Trump's plan is meant to boost Netanyahu's electoral fortunes and help keep him out of jail. But it can all backfire.

by Akiva Eldar

The devil is not in the details of the "deal of the century". The map that United States President Donald Trump tweeted on January 28 following the announcement of his Middle East plan shows what looks like a slice of Swiss cheese rather than of a sovereign Palestinian state.

But for Trump's main supporters - people like gambling tycoon Sheldon Adelson and his wife, Miriam Adelson, who stood in the front row during the announcement ceremony in the White House - this was yet another win.

These days, it is people like Adelson, rich conservative donors to the Trump campaign, along with the president's evangelical base, who are calling the shots in Washington and Jerusalem. They are always there, in the front row. They appeared satisfied and beaming at the 2018 inauguration of the US Embassy in Jerusalem - a move they had badgered and cajoled the president to make. He obviously did not regret it, even though the Palestinians severed ties with Washington as a result.

As far as Adelson is concerned, "the Palestinians are an invented people" whose sole purpose on Earth is to destroy Israel. Adelson was also among those who encouraged Trump to pull the US out of the nuclear agreement with Iran. He thinks Iran should have been nuked.

The corrupt symbiosis of money, power and media is no secret. In a June 2019 opinion piece in the freebie Israel Hayom newspaper, the Adelsons' biggest endowment to Israel's political right, Miriam Adelson gushed, "Trump should enjoy sweeping support among US Jews, just as he does among Israelis. That this has not been the case (so far; the 2020 election still beckons) is an oddity that will long be pondered by historians. Scholars of the Bible will no doubt note the heroes, sages, and prophets of antiquity who were similarly spurned by the very people they came to raise up. Would it be too much to pray for a day when the Bible gets a 'Book of Trump'?"

She ended her article suggesting, "Until that is decided, let us, at least, sit back and marvel at this time of miracles for Israel, for the United States, and for the whole world". No less.

But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will find it hard "to sit back and marvel". He will need a real miracle to extricate himself from criminal conviction. All of Adelson's billions cannot stop the wheels of justice spinning in Jerusalem.

While Netanyahu was waxing poetic in Washington about a "historic moment", history was being made in Jerusalem with the first-ever court filing of a criminal indictment against an incumbent Israeli prime minister. Unlike Trump, whose Senate-majority support is expected to save him from removal after the impeachment, Netanyahu has lost his majority in the Israeli legislature.

That led him this week to withdraw the request he submitted to the Knesset for immunity from prosecution. Since first losing the Knesset elections in April 2019, Netanyahu has led an interim government that does not enjoy a Knesset majority.

Nor did the September 2019 elections provide him with the needed majority to form a government. Polls indicate that the upcoming March 2 elections will not break the tie between the right-wing bloc led by Netanyahu and the centre-left bloc led by Blue and White party Chair Benny Gantz.

Netanyahu, however, is not giving up. He is seeking to turn the elections from a referendum on immunity, which he gave up on for lack of majority, into a "trial by the people". As his mouthpiece, Knesset member Miki Zohar, opined last June, "The Attorney General and the legal system will have to consider the election results, because the people are the sovereign."

Israeli law does not support this populist, dangerous opinion. Netanyahu, however, hopes that if the results of the country's third elections in less than a year perpetuate the political chaos, and necessitate a fourth round, a Knesset majority will be bound to support a unity government and the postponement of his trial till the end of days.

Although the latest polls indicate that at least 50 percent support the plan while only 24 percent oppose it in order to turn it to an exit from prison, Netanyahu will first have to obtain approval from the attorney general, the president and/or the Supreme Court.

They will need to set a shameful precedent that the Israeli democracy allows a person to form government despite criminal indictment against him. Currently the law obliges an indicted minister to resign, but not a prime minister.

Meanwhile, the "peace plan" has become an election football. Netanyahu and Gantz are competing to see which of them embraces the plan more tightly before he chokes it to death. Both know there is no chance - or more precisely for them, no danger - that the Palestinians will adopt it and thus force them to deal with the truly tough issues of handing over sovereign Israeli land to a Palestinian state.

Netanyahu's pro-Israel friends in the Trump administration, chief among them US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman and White House adviser Jared Kushner, helped sow numerous landmines among the pages of the "plan" to ensure the Palestinians will not even be tempted to discuss it.

American and Israeli archives are overflowing with position papers explaining why the Palestinians will never cede sovereignty over Jerusalem's Holy Basin and control of al-Haram al-Sharif. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has stated numerous times, both privately and publicly, that he cannot sign a document determining that Israel is the state (exclusively) of the Jewish people. No less of a major landmine is the precondition that Hamas be disarmed. If the Palestinian Authority will be tempted to accept this, it will lead to a Palestinian civil war.

A couple of hours after the announcement of the plan, Netanyahu promised to pass a resolution that will allow the annexation of the Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank as soon as Sunday. A few hours later, Kushner told him to hold the horses and keep the status quo until the March elections.

Right now, it seems that even Netanyahu's casino mogul friend will not be able to turn back the dice and save him from prison. What he will leave behind is despair in the Arab and Israeli peace camp and a "deal of the century" that may turn out to be the bluff of the millennium.

Source: al-Jazeera