

Resolving Gaza's 'Custody Battle'—the Capstone of Trump's Mideast Peace Negotiations?

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FORT LEE, New Jersey — After years of tumult in Gaza, which culminated in Israel's 15-month war to suppress Hamas after their butchery of innocent Israelis on October 7, 2023 and their taking over 200 hostages, we may finally see this beleaguered and desolate region morph into a prosperous land. Likening the sunny strip to a "Riviera," images of a bustling tourist hub – inhabited by "people of the world" – were presented on Tuesday night at an historic press conference held by President Trump together with Bibi Netanyahu.

But like any protracted "custody battle" – whether it's a fight over raising young children or a fight over sovereignty of land – there are always third parties involved. Within hours of the jubilant press conference to announce the US "takeover" of Gaza and the potential of turning this war ravaged region into the crown jewel of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia publicly affirmed their support for a Palestinian state as *sine qua non* to any normalization of relations with Israel. In essence, by awarding "custody" of Gaza to the United States – a sensible way of removing the detritus around the neck of the Israelis who clearly see that Hamas cannot be eradicated – Israel may be given no other choice than to accept a partial, if not complete, Palestinian state as its next-door neighbor.

It is uncontroverted that Saudi Arabia is driving a hard bargain. In this package-deal of Israel getting Gaza off its neck, and moving toward normalization, Saudi Arabia, acting *de facto* as a third party in this tense "custody battle" for Gaza, might be bootstrapping the Jewish state into accepting a Hobson's choice: Israel gets rid of its Gaza nightmare and the ensuing terror threats in exchange for giving up territory in Judea and Samaria to enable Palestinian sovereignty. Similar to custody battles that entail third party intervention in the resolution of an ongoing conflict (e.g., custody mediators, court-appointed experts, evaluators and so forth, often referred to as a "cottage industry"), regional conflicts seem to be stuck with interlopers as well. However, just as with custody situations in which third parties can exacerbate conditions and place children at risk, in warfare, likewise, intervening parties may also cause harm, even if it is unintended.

Would Israel be paying a dear price by having a Palestinian state next door after having encouraged the relocation of Gazans to Egypt or Jordan, or any Islamic country that would absorb the 1.8 million population? That is, would a newly-formed Palestinian state mete out "collective punishment" to Israel, claiming a "second Nabka," for their role in the displacement of the Gazan population? Moreover, given the Saudi demand for a Palestinian state – and its ensuing imprimatur for its rapid establishment – would this embolden a Palestinian state to assert its dominion in the Levant region to the detriment of Israel?

I don't doubt for a minute that much time and planning have been invested in Trump's courageous initiative to have the US "take over" Gaza and build up its prosperity, while offering the denizens a chance to have a more habitable existence away from the rubble and wreckage. Furthermore, the Gazans would be free of Hamas which still has a noticeable grip on the civilian population. We witnessed this just two weeks ago when a jeering crowd of voyeuristic onlookers ogled the hostages as they were being released from captivity in central Gaza. Civilians and Hamas terrorists stood shoulder-to-shoulder in this painful spectacle of humiliation of the hostages, some of whom were pitifully emaciated after being kept in tunnels for months. How can one rebuild Gaza when it's infested by terrorists who are tightly interwoven with the civilian population that has succumbed to them?

Trump certainly made it clear at the press conference that maintaining the status quo is not a solution. In addressing this complex situation, we cannot fool ourselves either. It's axiomatic that the US must have crucial strategic ties to Saudi Arabia, so as not to lose them to its strategic rival, China. To that end, it would be foolhardy to ignore, downplay, or dismiss Saudi Arabia's inexorable position on an independent Palestinian state because their wishes must be fulfilled if they are to uphold their end of the bargain.

On a more optimistic note, perhaps with US ownership of Gaza, its presence in the region would temper a hostile Palestinian state that would pose an existential threat to Israel. Certainly, the US would defend its ally if it were threatened by a Palestinian neighboring state. But herein lies a double-edge sword: Will opening the door to US ownership of Gaza lead the way for a future presidential administration, which may not be as friendly toward the Jewish state as Trump, to see Israel as a "vassal state" – subject to the whims and wishes of the US that would own land right next-door to the Jewish state?

Israel's cutting a deal with a super power naturally entails obligations and restrictions. It's important to consider whether a surrender of "custody" of Gaza to the US will prove down the road to be disadvantageous to a prosperous, independent, leading nation that has shown itself repeatedly to be one of the world's leaders in science, technology, and defense. As with any "custody battle" there are wins and losses. Perhaps it's judicious to evaluate all angles of Trump's well-intended plan to rescue a close ally in a conflict-ridden region and to finally bring a surcease of sorrow.

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