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OPINION | COMMENTARY

The Promise of the Trump Peace Plan

It would bypass corrupt and dictatorial Palestinian leaders who have stalled the process since 1993.

By Natan Sharansky and Gil Troy

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President Bill Clinton and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in the White House, Sept. 23, 1999.

PHOTO: AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

To complete his “deal of the century,” President Trump forces Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to shake hands with . . . nobody. “For years we tried making peace with the Palestinians,” Mr. Netanyahu marvels, “but only you thought of this genius move: making peace without Palestinians.”

Thus ended a sketch from the Israeli TV comedy “Eretz Nehederet.” But the show’s writers, like most others, missed the Trump peace plan’s potential. It can succeed not by ignoring the Palestinians but by bypassing their corrupt, dictatorial leaders.

The conventional wisdom is that the Palestinian leadership didn’t show up to receive the peace

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interested in making peace, if only Israel made the right concessions. Many in the West wish this to be true, but what's really missing is a Palestinian leadership interested in Israel as a peace partner, not a convenient enemy.

That's why the Trump peace plan is only the latest that Palestinian leaders have rejected. During negotiations at Camp David in 2000, President Clinton and Prime Minister Ehud Barak made desperate efforts to obtain a deal. Mr. Barak's sweeping concessions surprised Israelis. But Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian Authority's president, didn't even respond with a counteroffer. Eight years later, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered an even more generous deal contingent on one essential demand: that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state. This acknowledgment is the essential precondition to ending the century-old Arab war against a Jewish presence in the region. Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas, refused.

Mr. Abbas's position hasn't budged. "They want me to recognize Israel as a Jewish state," he said this month in Cairo. "I know it's not a Jewish state."

The standard American interpretation is that Palestinian leaders keep violating the spirit of 1993, when Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shook hands in front of Mr. Clinton and signed the Oslo Agreement. But Oslo's strategic miscalculations laid the groundwork for the subsequent Palestinian intransigence, guaranteeing that Israel would lack a genuine peace partner.

Israeli leaders in the early 1990s were faced with a choice: With whom should they negotiate? Since 1983 Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization had been in exile in Tunis but continued executing terrorist attacks. Yet rather than working with local Palestinians who had experience with grass-roots Israeli democracy, Israeli leaders and their Western counterparts brought Arafat back and made him a dictator.

They viewed Arafat's authoritarian nature as a plus—how else could he control even more violent Palestinian enemies of peace such as Hamas? To ensure his commitment to peaceful negotiation, Arafat's Palestinian Authority received billions of dollars in Western aid, on top of the tens of millions he skimmed monthly from Palestinian tax revenue. He personally accumulated nearly \$1 billion before his death in 2004.

The zeal for peace at any price overlooked the basics of Dictatorship 101. Repressive regimes maintain control over their people by mobilizing them with external foes to fight and internal dissidents to destroy. To hold on to power, Arafat needed Israel as an enemy, not a partner.

Those of us who offered this critique in 1993 were dismissed. Yet the result of Oslo was Arafat's 10-year reign of terror. He brutalized his own people from the start, crushing all opposition. He alternated between talking peace and terrorizing Israel when each was useful to him, while

Israelis even more. Meanwhile, he kept Western leaders believing that one more Israeli concession, one more agreement, would bring a peace he never intended to deliver.

Mr. Abbas has lasted longer than Arafat and is now serving the 15th year of a four-year presidential term. He has been the Palestinians' Dr. No—no elections and no peace.

Nevertheless, Western leaders have tolerated Mr. Abbas's undemocratic rule and dictatorial tendency to demonize Israel. The West has never been comfortable linking the peace process with building a free Palestinian society. The plan since the 1990s has been to impose peace from the top down rather than nourishing a civil society to facilitate peace from the bottom up.

Here's the irony: The same President Trump who shows little interest in promoting human rights or democratic values abroad, and who asserts that North Koreans "love" dictator Kim Jong Un with "great fervor," might be the one to reverse Oslo's antidemocratic miscalculation.

Mr. Trump's peace plan resists the temptation to create a Palestinian state immediately. Instead it offers a four-year-transition period for Palestinian economic, social and political detoxification, backed by \$50 billion.

Don't fixate on the sum. For decades the free world has bombarded the Palestinian Authority with cash that strengthened its dictatorial grip while enriching leaders and their cronies. But because Mr. Abbas said "a thousand times no" to the deal, and because the Trump administration seems ready to bypass him, this time could be different. What Mr. Abbas calls "the slap of the century" may be the opportunity of the century.

One of us (Natan Sharansky) served as Israel's minister of industry and trade in the 1990s and was involved during the Oslo period in efforts to bolster the Palestinian economy. This firsthand look was sobering. For Arafat and his henchmen, it was more important to keep job creation and distribution under their control than to promote prosperity for ordinary Palestinians. International investments became opportunities for patronage and racketeering.

Today Mr. Abbas may be weak enough and some Palestinian businessmen strong enough for what the Trump peace plan calls "independent businesses" to take center stage. According to Ashraf Jabari, an entrepreneur from Hebron, 15 Palestinian businessmen attended the Trump-initiated economic workshop in Bahrain that preceded the peace plan. Even though Mr. Abbas had his forces detain and hassle some on their return, he wasn't strong enough to keep the pressure on.

If the West and friendly Arab nations can work directly with pragmatic Palestinian business leaders, there's a chance we could see hundreds of thousands of independent jobs emerging in the West Bank, new housing built for the masses, and the emptying of cramped refugee camps.



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There's also a chance that independent, pro-democracy schools will emerge, as the plan proposes. While Palestinian schools and textbooks have long been criticized for inciting hatred, the free world's representatives on the ground have hesitated to support pro-tolerance programs that Mr. Abbas's office hasn't approved.

Four years aren't enough to make a full transition from dictatorship to democracy or from decades of war to peace. But it could be enough for the first seeds of Palestinian civil society to sprout, and for the Palestinian masses to appreciate the advantages of living in such a society. These people, and the leaders they elevate, can become Israel's real and not imagined partners in peace.

When the formula of "two states for two peoples" is negotiated by leaders who are more interested in the well-being of their people than in cementing control over them, the real peace process can begin.

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