

# Trump's Gaza Plan: A Test for Arab Leaders

by Hilal Khashan - February 24, 2025

Earlier this month, U.S. President Donald Trump announced during a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu his plan to take over the Gaza Strip and resettle its residents in Egypt and Jordan. A week later, he reiterated his intention during a press briefing in Washington with Jordanian King Abdullah II, who appeared uncomfortable listening to Trump's proposal but avoided challenging the president on the matter. Fearing a similarly embarrassing situation, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi canceled his own visit to Washington set for Feb. 18.

The Palestinian question was the focal point of Arab foreign policy until the 1967 Six-Day War. Since then, Arab countries have sought various peace treaties with Israel and grown dependent on U.S. protection for their survival. Though they cannot endorse Trump's plan to evict Palestinians from Gaza and transform the strip into a "Riviera of the Middle East," neither can they simply dismiss his assertions. Trump has challenged Arab leaders to come up with an alternative plan for Gaza, knowing they likely cannot.

## Resettlement Revisited

Many observers have compared Trump's proposal to resettle Palestinians in neighboring countries to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's willingness to host them in Sinai in the early 1950s. But the conditions that led Nasser to favor the resettlement of Gazan refugees differ fundamentally from the situation in the region today. After the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, it was the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) that proposed resettling refugees who had fled to Gaza during the conflict, in accordance with U.N. General Assembly resolution 194. The initiative would not have affected the 80,000 Gaza residents who were living there before the war. Arabs generally viewed it as a humanitarian endeavor, given the wide range of relief services the agency provided, rather than a liquidation plan, as opponents of Trump's proposal see it.

However, even the U.N.-sponsored initiative ultimately collapsed. In 1953, UNRWA and Egypt, under Nasser, signed a plan to resettle 120,000 refugees from Gaza. Two years later, they agreed that the Egyptian town of Qantara, located east of Suez and 220 kilometers (140 miles) southwest of Gaza, would be the location of a new settlement for the refugees. But in retaliation for the United States and Britain's refusal to fund the construction of the Aswan High Dam, Nasser withdrew his support from

the project.

## **Arab Reactions**

The Palestinian issue has long been a sensitive topic in the Arab world, so Arab governments know they cannot be seen as supportive of a U.S. plan to remove Palestinians from Gaza. Still, Arab countries' responses to the proposal have been weak and indecisive. They even postponed an emergency Arab League summit scheduled for the end of this month to discuss an alternative plan for Gaza, under the pretext that some Arab heads of state had prior commitments.

El-Sissi launched a fierce media campaign to try to convince the Egyptian public that Cairo will not give in to threats and blackmail. (Pentagon officials had hinted to Egyptian officials that military aid, including repairs to equipment and spare parts, could be affected by Egypt's position on the Trump plan.) Egyptian officials also helped organize demonstrations against the proposal, hoping to convey a message to Washington that the Egyptian people (and not just the government) rejected the relocation plan. Egypt's top mufti called the proposal irresponsible and provocative and said it violates international norms and humanitarian standards – sentiments Arab leaders dare not say themselves.

El-Sissi has erroneously claimed that the relocation of Gazans to Egypt would be a direct threat to his regime, as Palestinians would disseminate a culture of resistance and promote their own interests inside Egypt. In a public address, el-Sissi described the displacement of Palestinians as an injustice in which Cairo cannot participate and insisted that he would not tolerate any actions that harm Egyptian national security, without specifying how resettling Gazans in Sinai would do so. But he also reiterated his determination to work with Trump and said the U.S. president still wants to achieve a two-state solution. Despite believing that Israel will not allow the establishment of a Palestinian state, Egypt at least officially continues to focus on the importance of cooperation with the United States to achieve a just peace between the Palestinians and Israel and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

Egyptian officials told the U.S. director of national intelligence that Cairo will cancel its peace agreement with Israel if the Trump administration continues to push to displace Gaza residents or stops the flow of U.S. aid. However, the most el-Sissi can do is temporarily suspend the Camp David Accords, knowing the consequences of fully repealing the treaty would be intolerable for Cairo. The Egyptians fear that Trump's global ambitions go beyond annexing Canada and Greenland and acquiring Ukraine's mineral resources. They believe he could be eyeing the Sinai Desert, given its strategic location, abundance of natural resources and tourist attractions.

Egypt has learned the lessons of the 1967 war. It is not serious about a military confrontation with Israel, no matter what happens to Palestinians in Gaza, and it will not create the conditions for another disastrous conflict, despite the uproar. The Egyptian government even released a statement saying the Egyptian and U.S. presidents agreed on a number of topics during a recent call, avoiding any mention of Trump's Gaza proposal.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, most Arab countries, including Jordan, issued perfunctory statements rejecting Trump's calls to displace people from Gaza. But they failed to announce any measures to counter the plan. Their responses likely won't go beyond verbal denunciations, a time-honored practice for Arab officials.

### **Egypt's Proposal**

Cairo has said it is preparing a plan to reconstruct Gaza within three to five years without displacing its residents. For several reasons, however, the proposal is impractical and would be difficult to implement. Experts say reconstruction could take more than a decade. It would be nearly impossible to reconstruct Gaza with Palestinians remaining in the strip because it is such a small area. Though the destruction is valued at more than \$100 billion, Egypt says reconstruction will cost half that amount. Arab Gulf countries have promised to contribute \$20 billion, but their commitment is doubtful considering they have broken many promises in the past. The biggest question is where the rest of the money, more than \$30 billion, will come from. It's unlikely the Trump administration will provide all or part of it, especially in light of its move to suspend much of its foreign aid.

Meanwhile, Egypt is suffering from a worsening economic crisis. Since el-Sissi took power after his 2013 coup d'état, his policies have triggered high inflation, multiple currency devaluations, soaring foreign debt and high unemployment. Internal discontent is high, and social unrest looms on the horizon. The urgent need for U.S. aid will likely lead el-Sissi to comply with Trump's plan for Gaza, though he will continue to resist to secure more economic benefits from Trump.

Trump exempted Egypt from his recent decision to cut off foreign aid to many countries. Earlier this month, the U.S. approved two deals to sell arms to Egypt, worth about \$930 million. In addition, the only Arab rulers Trump has invited to the White House so far are the Jordanian king and the Egyptian president. He also expressed interest in mediating the 15-year conflict between Cairo and Addis Ababa over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

But Trump does not need to motivate el-Sissi or King Abdullah to accept his plan because he knows they can't reject it, despite their public statements and the media fanfare. Trump knows that the Arab

regimes are oppressive dictatorships that depend on U.S. approval and protection for their survival.

El-Sissi has no empathy for the Palestinians and views Hamas as an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood. Shortly after the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023, el-Sissi proposed relocating the people of Gaza to the radioactively contaminated Negev Desert until Israel finishes eliminating Hamas. He also suggested a peace deal between Arab states and Israel in 2017, three years before Trump announced the Abraham Accords, even though he later denied doing so. There is a big gap between what el-Sissi says, mainly for local public consumption, and what he means. Trump's statements, meanwhile, are often meant to intimidate and shouldn't be interpreted as concrete policy. But regardless of where his Gaza plan ultimately settles, Arab leaders wouldn't dare challenge him on it.

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