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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Trump's growing disconnect from the Arab world

There appears to be a big, and growing, disconnect between Donald Trump and the Arab world. In the almost three weeks I spent recently in various Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, I heard nary a word about his idea to take over Gaza. Granted, I was there mostly for several art events, but art and politics have a way of blending.

The most outspoken, unsurprisingly, was a Palestinian artist involved with the Gaza art scene. They creatively suggested that if Trump was so keen to get Palestinians out of Gaza, the receiving country should be Israel, not another Arab country.

Of course it was not a serious suggestion, as any forced displacement should be completely beyond the pale. But within the logic of the current through-the-looking-glass debate, it stands out as being relatively sane, satisfying at least some logistical and moral requirements.

Just imagine the howls of outrage in Israel should it ever be suggested that the country absorb at least several hundred thousand Palestinians from Gaza who have now been made homeless and who lived in permanent so-called refugee camps before these were demolished in the recent fighting.

Somehow, Israeli interests, including increasingly extremist right-wing public opinion, are seen as carrying weight in all the crazy talk about how to exit the Gaza debacle. Because a debacle it is, not just due to the recent war but from the creation of the 'Strip' in 1948.

How to escape from an unsustainable situation?

All involved, including Israel, Egypt, the UN, the Palestinian leadership and the Islamic militant movements, have treated the people involved shamefully. Gaza, into the 1990s, was a dire, benighted place and lagged behind, but conditions were in many ways not that different from those in many of the poorer Arab countries.

The uptick in violence and the Israeli-led blockade after the Israeli disengagement in 2005 and the Hamas victory in the 2006 elections have quite literally laid ruin to the territory.

> Trump's proposals come down to the same wish to completely ignore the existence of the Palestinians in Gaza that all involved have displayed until now

Trump has been praised by some for at least offering a new way of thinking about how to escape from an unsustainable situation. Unsustainable in terms both of the living condition of the population and of the constant tit-for-tat violence that has marked the past decades and longer.

But that's totally misguided. If Trump offers quiet, it's the quiet of the graveyard. His proposals, if you can call them that, come down to the same wish to completely ignore the existence of the Palestinians in Gaza that all involved have displayed until now.

Trump's plan is inconceivable in the region

It's hardly surprising that in the Arab Gulf countries, hardly anybody had anything to say about Trump's proposed American takeover of Gaza. It's so outlandish, far-fetched and brutal that even discussing it would be a distraction from the actual suffering that's going on there right now.

Trump's plan is simply inconceivable in the region, just as it would be inconceivable in Israel to absorb hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from Gaza.

The difference is that Israeli concerns are apparently being taken seriously, while the Arab countries' concerns are batted away. Yet, there will be no progress on Gaza or any other

regional question without taking these concerns into account.

Saudi Arabia, partly fortuitously, has ended up as the likely central factor in determining the power balance in the region over the next couple of years. I say, partly fortuitously, because the Kingdom has benefited from Israel at least temporarily eroding the Iranian position.

> Saudi Arabia, just like two other countries now being buffeted by the torrent of Trump 'ideas', Egypt and Jordan, has a large population that it needs to take into account

But it has also played the long game by not joining the Abraham Accords with Israel during the first Trump term.

There are those who see Saudi Arabia's manoeuvring as merely a play for more power and influence in the region. The old game of burnishing a regime's Palestine credentials in order to lead the Arab world, and the famed yet elusive Arab street.

If that's a consideration, it's only a secondary one. Saudi Arabia, just like two other countries now being buffeted by the torrent of Trump 'ideas', Egypt and Jordan, actually has a large population that it needs to take into account.

Not having a large native population to satisfy is a huge advantage

This stands in sharp contrast to the United Arab Emirates, the linchpin of the Abraham Accords signed in September 2020. Bahrain, the other country that signed up at the time, has a population that's just over 50 percent Bahraini and has citizenship.

In the UAE, that proportion is just north of 11 percent, the rest are expatriates, foreign workers and longtime residents without citizenship.

Since all the countries in the region are autocracies, not having a large native population to satisfy, is a huge advantage when it comes to such unpopular issues as coexisting with Israel.

Saudi Arabia has a rapidly growing population of over 34 million, with a large youthful bump coming up, in need of jobs, income, and, indeed, distraction.

The Saudi regime will wish to refrain from anything that can ignite social and political tensions, such as open abandonment of the Palestinians - Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman

The country is attempting to modernise at what is certainly, for a until recently relatively isolated desert kingdom, a breakneck speed. It is also attempting to finally give real meaning to the decades-old drive of 'Saudization', i.e. to have jobs filled by their own citizens, rather than import labour.

It's probably more successful in some of these endeavours than in others. There are clearly many more local people involved in the economy than in the neighbouring Emirates. But whether this is enough and what it means for productivity, remains to be seen.

Modernisation might be necessary to create a dynamic and diverse economy, rather than one still hugely reliant on petrodollars, it could also create deep fissures among the population.

While many of the young Saudis seem to embrace the newfound freedoms, for example,

many more women in the workplace and now also on the roads, as well as cinemas and even raves, large parts of the population remain visibly connected to an ultra-conservative way of life.

The Saudi regime is as autocratic as any in the region and dissent will be quickly squashed. But at the same time, it will wish to refrain from anything that can ignite social and political tensions, such as open abandonment of the Palestinians.

The same globally holds true for Egypt, while in Jordan, it's unthinkable to mess with the already delicate balance between original 'East Bank' Jordanians and Palestinians. The country basically fought a civil war in 1970 and has since been careful not to upset the apple cart.

Trump's wild pronouncements on Gaza are a non-starter and a distraction, or at most it's posturing meant to force other concessions on the Arab states. In this case, that bluff is being called by the reality in several of those countries. Meanwhile, Palestinians face a bleak future, whichever way things go.