

# The Sinai Option | RealClearPolitics

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Peter Berkowitz

On Tuesday, Feb. 4, barely two weeks into his second term, President Donald Trump hosted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. On the occasion of his first official meeting in Washington with a foreign leader since returning to the White House, the president took several decisive actions that should have surprised nobody: He withdrew the United States from the UN Human Rights Council; he ended funding for UNRWA; and he reinstated the maximum pressure campaign of Iranian sanctions that, in his first term, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo led.

Then, at a press conference with Netanyahu, Trump delivered prepared remarks that astonished onlookers around the world, including American supporters and senior administration officials. The president stated that Gaza, much of which lies in ruins, should be rebuilt, but not by or with the assistance of the approximately 2 million Palestinians living there. Without naming names, the president said that humanitarian considerations will compel other countries to provide accommodations for Gazans and “neighboring countries of great wealth” would pay for their relocation. “The U.S. will take over the Gaza Strip,” Trump said. And not for a short while. “I do see a long-term ownership position, and I see it bringing great stability to that part of the Middle East, and maybe the entire Middle East.” The United States will remove the wreckage, “create an economic development that will supply unlimited numbers of jobs and housing for the people of the area,” and turn Gaza into “the Riviera of the Middle East.”

Perhaps the president’s far-fetched scheme will serve as an opening bid to address the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza while ensuring Israel’s security. The best case is that it creates room for diplomatic maneuvering, causing out-of-the box ideas to come into focus as reasonable and obtainable.

Trump presented a preliminary version of his implausible proposal in a Jan. 25 call to King Abdullah II of Jordan, suggesting that Jordan and Egypt take in approximately 2 million Gazans.

A mordant old Israeli joke captures the deep-seated Egyptian – and not only Egyptian – antipathy to Gaza that contributes to rendering the president’s idea unworkable.

The joke stems from the period following the 1979 U.S.-brokered Israel-Egypt peace agreement – in exchange for full diplomatic relations with Egypt, Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula, which it captured in the 1967 Six Day War. The joke goes like this: Not long after the deal was signed, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin telephones Egyptian President

Anwar Sadat. “Anwar,” says Begin in an upbeat tone, “Israel has decided also to return the Gaza Strip to Egypt.” After a long pause, Sadat replies coolly, “Thank you, Menachem. But what will Israel give Egypt in return?”

More than four decades later, Egypt’s aversion to assuming responsibility for Gaza’s Palestinian population remains firm. In response to President Trump’s Jan. 25 [call](#), the Egyptian foreign ministry stated that Cairo “rejects any relocation or transfer of Palestinians to Egypt, whether temporary or permanent” because “it risks stability and threatens to further spread the conflict in the region.”

The risks and threats begin with the allegiance to Iran-backed Hamas among many Gazans. Hamas is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928 in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna. The Brotherhood aims to impose Sharia supremacy not only in Egypt but throughout the Muslim Arab world. Following the military takeover in 2013 led by then-Minister of Defense and Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt declared the Brotherhood a terrorist organization and banned them. President of Egypt since 2014, Sisi can hardly be expected to welcome to Egypt hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who, he has good reason to fear, harbor Islamist sympathies, hate his government, and seek its overthrow.

Sisi knows, moreover, that Palestinians destabilized Jordan in the 1960s and early 1970s, Lebanon in the 1970s and early 1980s, and Kuwait in the early 1990s. He also appreciates that the Palestinian cause still grips the popular imagination in his country of almost 120 million people. While he would be delighted for Israel to accomplish its goal in Gaza of destroying Hamas’ ability to wage war and govern, Sisi will not want to be seen by Egyptians as encouraging Palestinians to betray their cause by leaving Gaza, and certainly not by coming to Egypt.

Jordan uncompromisingly opposes Trump’s plan, too. The day after Trump’s call with the Hashemite king, Jordanian foreign minister Ayman Safadi stated, “Our rejection of the displacement of Palestinians is firm and unwavering and is necessary to achieve the stability and peace that we all want.” Of approximately 11 million persons living in Jordan, Palestinians represent about 3 million. Coupled with the country’s own Muslim Brotherhood organization, Jordan’s large Palestinian population presents a persistent threat to Abdullah II’s throne. In 1951, Palestinians assassinated his grandfather King Abdullah, and in 1970 they tried to overthrow his father, King Hussein. After that failed coup, Jordan expelled Yasser Arafat’s Palestinian Liberation Organization. Even as King Abdullah II considers Israel a crucial partner in the struggle against Iran and would be happy for Israel to crush Hamas in Gaza, he, like Egypt’s Sisi, does not want to be viewed by fellow Arabs as weakening Palestinian claims to territory in which they dwell.

On Feb. 1, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, meeting in Cairo, issued a joint statement. All key players, the five Arab nations “rejected any efforts to encourage the transfer or uprooting of Palestinians from their land, under any circumstances or justifications.”

On Feb. 5, hours after the Trump-Netanyahu press conference, Saudi Arabia dismissed – without directly referring to – the president’s plan. Riyadh stressed its “firm and unwavering” commitment to a Palestinian state and its “unequivocal rejection ... of attempts to displace the Palestinian people from their land.”

One can lament Arab hard-heartedness toward fellow Arabs. One can note invidiously that Europe has absorbed some 6 million Ukrainian refugees while the greater Arab world, stretching from Morocco to Iraq, has taken in approximately 100,000 Gazans. One can dream of masterclass dealmaking and of transforming hearts and minds. But the odds are exceedingly low that Jordan and Egypt will welcome massive flows of Gazan refugees or that Saudi Arabia will encourage them to do so.

Still, something must be done. Hamas’ horrific assault on southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, brought down catastrophe on Gaza. As a result of Israel’s exercise of its right to self-defense against a jihadist enemy that embedded its forces within and under Gaza’s civilian population, “[a]t least 1.9 million people across the Gaza Strip have been internally displaced,” reports the Wall Street Journal based on UN assessments. The UN also estimates that the war has “left 63% of Gaza’s structures either destroyed or damaged,” and “has produced more than 45,000 tons of concrete and metal debris, an amount that would take as long as 15 years to remove.”

The Sinai option may have once seemed fanciful, but its time may have come. It’s more ambitious than conventional approaches but substantially less so than Trump’s plan. It would ameliorate Gaza’s humanitarian catastrophe without compromising Israeli security.

The United States along with Saudi Arabia and the UAE should persuade Egypt by means of generous financial inducements to open the sparsely populated 10-15 miles of Sinai adjacent to Gaza to Palestinians seeking a fresh start and better life. Egypt would not absorb Gazans and make them citizens but rather move Gaza’s border 10-15 miles westward into Sinai. Fences would be erected along the new border. Israel Defense Forces (IDF) would maintain border security on the Gaza-extension side, Egyptian forces on the other. Egypt might lease the land to the Palestinians for 75 years.

The Sinai option does not involve forced transfer of civilian populations, which the international laws of war bar. As the United States, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other partners build temporary dwellings and then apartment buildings and towns, they would provide bus service to the Gaza-extension. Palestinian families that choose to make the short trip would receive a key to a new residence and, say, \$10,000.

The Sinai option is flawed. Cairo will decry it as infringing Egyptian sovereignty. Palestinians will denounce fellow Palestinians who opt to rebuild their lives in the Sinai extension. The process poses risks to Israeli soldiers, who will retain overall responsibility for Gaza security. And while it will reduce congestion and squalor in Gaza's encampments and offer opportunity to those who move to the Gaza extension as well as to those who stay, the Sinai option will not end the Gaza crisis.

Then again, all conventional options for rehabilitating and governing Gaza are terrible. An international coalition would be toothless and irresolute. The corrupt and sclerotic Palestinian Authority, which rules Palestinians in Judea and Samaria, would have been overthrown by Hamas long ago but for the IDF. And many Israelis recoil at the prospect of administering Gaza.

Meanwhile, Trump's extravagant proposal, while meant to please everybody, has united America's moderate Arab friends in opposition.

Falling between the conventional and the extravagant and working with rather than surrendering to or glossing over the region's harsh realities, the Sinai option can diminish the Gaza crisis while advancing America's interests in regional security and stability as well as those of Israel and America's moderate Arab friends.

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