



LUND UNIVERSITY

Trump's 'deal of the century' could become a new Sykes-Picot for the Middle East

Persson, Anders

Published in:
Times of Israel

2019

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Persson, A. (2019). Trump's 'deal of the century' could become a new Sykes-Picot for the Middle East. *Times of Israel*.

Total number of authors:

1

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00



THE BLOGS

**Anders
Persson**

Trump's 'deal of the century' could become a new Sykes-Picot for the Middle East



Just like the Sykes-Picot agreement and the Treaty of Versailles were among the worst deals of the last century for the Middle East, Trump's peace plan could become the worst deal of this century

A hundred years ago this year, world leaders came together at the Versailles castle outside Paris to work out what many of them thought would be a peace to end all wars. Astonishingly by today's standards, they remained there for six long months. Rather than being a peace to end all wars, the Treaty of Versailles is now widely seen to have been a peace to end all peace, which is also the title of David Fromkin's [famous book](#) on the creation of the modern Middle East after the fall of the Ottoman empire. Three years earlier, in 1916, the British and the French, with a little help from the Russians, had drawn up the secret Sykes-Picot agreement, which divided up large parts of the Middle East in spheres of influence for the Europeans, later formalized by mandates from the League of Nations in 1920. It was these borders that the Islamic state began to unravel after the group emerged in 2014. In one of its most infamous propaganda videos, "[Flames of War: Fighting Has Just Begun](#)," the Islamic state referred to the Sykes-Picot agreement as the "black pages of history," because it led to the introduction of secular states in the Middle East.

Today we are again in a situation where a foreign peace plan with the grandiose name "the deal of the century" may be imposed on the peoples of the Middle East, presumably against the will of most of them. We still do not know exactly what Trump's peace plan will include, or if it will be released, in partial or even less in full. [Repeated leaks](#), however, have over the past 18 months hinted that the Palestinians will be offered much less than in previous rounds of negotiations. Most of the leaks hint at a Palestinian entity with limited or no sovereignty on around 50 percent of

the West Bank plus Gaza, no return of refugees, no control of their holy places in Jerusalem, and with all or most of the settlements remaining. One [leak](#) to Israeli Channel 13 News in January of this year said that the Palestinians would get 85-90 percent of the West Bank plus shared administration of Jerusalem's holy places, which is more in line with previous negotiations, but still far short of what the Palestinian Authority (PA) wants. Whereas the Oslo peace process was based on two principles: mutual recognition and land for peace, Trump's peace plan seems to be based on cash for peace. This is why President Abbas repeatedly has referred to it as "[the slap of the century](#)".

It is important to emphasize that very few Palestinians will be disappointed by Trump's peace plan in the short perspective, because they expect very little from him. But a really bad deal will add to the humiliation that many Palestinians and others in the Arab and Muslim world already feel in relation to Western policies in the region. The past two intifadas of 1987 and 2000 clearly show that hopelessness is a great destabilizer in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but that it should be measured in months and years, not days and weeks, as Israeli expert Daniel Seidemann [recently pointed out](#).

If released, Trump's peace plan will come at a time when there is great uncertainty in the conflict and in the wider region, from talks of Israel's annexation of the settlements, to fears of the PA's collapse, to the ongoing intra-Palestinian rivalry between Fatah and Hamas, to the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, and rising tensions with Iran. Add to that a regional context where all of the neighboring states, Jordan in particular, might be negatively affected by a bad deal. More and more warnings are now being heard, most recently from U.S senators Mitt Romney and Chris Murphy, who visited Jordan two weeks ago and [warned](#) that Trump's peace

plan could destabilize the kingdom, which supposedly is the last thing the U.S wants given Jordan's central role and strategic location in the region. Around the same time, Abbas's adviser, Mahmoud Habbash, [warned](#) that Trump's peace plan "will change the foundations of Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Sinai and even the Gulf states" in a negative way.

It could be that Trump surprises his critics and presents a plan that will be fairer to the Palestinians than what everybody expects, which would then be a step in the right direction towards a little bit less occupation and a little bit more freedom for the Palestinians, just like the Oslo agreements and the Gaza withdrawal were, even if they fell far short of what the Palestinians wanted at the time. At present, however, there is little suggesting that Trump will be campaigning in the 2020 election on demanding painful concessions from the Israelis, like major territorial withdrawals or settlement evacuations, which would alienate some of his core constituencies, closest advisors and donors. On the contrary, Trump seems to already be campaigning on making Israel-Palestine a wedge issue between the Republican and Democratic party. In itself, this is nothing new in American politics. What is new is the ideological context of identity politics and populism in which this now takes place. Since the Israeli-Palestinian conflict began in the latter half on the 19th century, it has always been a symbol for the big strategic and ideological contestations of world politics: from Western colonialism during and after the first world war, to the Holocaust during the second world war, to the superpower rivalry during the cold war, to the clash of civilizations and the global war on terrorism in more recent decades. Nowadays, the conflict is rapidly becoming a symbol for the emerging polarizing identity politics and populism that we see in many parts of the world, from my native Sweden, to Central Europe, to Brazil, to India, to the U.S and other countries.

Today's world is, of course, radically different in many ways compared to the world a hundred years ago when many of the crucial decisions regarding Israel-Palestine were taken in Western capitals, but there are also striking similarities. Then and now, there was great uncertainty about the future, polarizing nationalism was an important factor in many countries, state leaders in the West ignored warnings about local dissatisfaction in the Middle East, and crucial decisions were taken in the West on the basis of domestic interests rather than of concern for the region. With the benefit of hindsight, we should brace ourselves for the consequences of more bad deals for the Middle East.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anders Persson is a political scientist at Lund University, Sweden. He has written three books about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of which the latest is *The EU and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict 1971-2013: In Pursuit of a Just Peace* (Lanham, Lexington Books: 2015). He has also published peer-reviewed articles in journals such as *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *Mediterranean Politics*, *Journal of European Integration*, *Middle East Critique*, *Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security* and *New Middle Eastern Studies*. He is expert commentator on Swedish TV/radio/press on Israel-Palestine and contributes regularly to *Haaretz*, *Politico EU* and *EU Observer*.