

# Netanyahu entraps Trump in a quagmire

by M. K. Bhadrakumar,\* India



M. K. Bhadrakumar  
(Picture ma)

*Seldom, if ever, one gets to pick up the threads of what one had written 3 days back as conjectures. But my prognosis that “the sea side view” of Gaza is mesmerising President Donald Trump and his special envoy for the Middle East Steve Witkoff, two great*

*real estate developers of modern times, is literally so. See my blog “Trump turn is bad news for West Asia”, [Indianpunchline.com](https://www.indianpunchline.com), February 3, 2025.<sup>1</sup>*

There is no question that at the talks with President *Donald Trump* in the Oval Office on Tuesday [4 February], the visiting Israeli Prime Minister *Benjamin Netanyahu* pulled off by far the biggest success story of his tumultuous 17 years in power as the longest-serving prime minister of his country by mooted the daring proposition that a long-term solution for Gaza Strip lies in the takeover of that entire area by the US and transforming it as the “Riviera of the Middle East” (Trump’s words.)

From what has emerged at the White House press conference on Tuesday, the US which has no history of nation-building is embarking on an undertaking that is both daunting in scope and impossible to achieve. Never mind, Netanyahu’s triumphalist look standing beside Trump exuded a measure of confidence that he has got a deal with Trump.

The deal is pivoted on the controversial idea of emptying Gaza Strip of its population and resettling the 1.8 million Palestinian inhabitants in certain unspecified countries and the reconstruction of the vacant land, which is roughly the

\* M. K. Bhadrakumar has worked for about three decades as a career diplomat in the service of the Indian Foreign Ministry. He has served as ambassador to the former Soviet Union, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Germany and Turkey. His texts mainly deal with Indian foreign policy and events in the Middle East, Eurasia, Central Asia, South Asia and Pacific Asia. His blog is called “Indian Punchline”.



Gaza City before the war. All people have a right to their own homeland. (Picture wikipedia)

same land area as Las Vegas or twice the size of Washington, DC. Gaza’s coastline is 40 km long and Trump hopes to transform it into a watering hole for the rich and the famous, which will mean lots of menial jobs in the services sector for Palestinians eventually.

Trump used the expression “take over” of Gaza Strip. He didn’t elaborate. Trump and *Steve Witkoff* are two master-builders, and they visualise the seamless potential of killing many birds with a single shot:

- first and foremost, strengthening Israel’s security through the ethnic cleansing and resettlement in Gaza;
- two, restoration of Israel’s regional dominance in the region in a medium and long term perspective;
- three, a solution to the intractable Palestinian problem;
- four, rendering obsolete the various outlandish ideas like “two-state solution”;
- five, burial of the very notion of a Palestinian state;
- six, Israel’s regional integration through *Abraham Accords*; and,
- above all, massive business spin-off for American companies for decades to come out of the development of the “Riviera of the Middle East”.

The US strategy is quintessentially a continuation of what Trump pursued in his first term with a hands-on involvement in the West Asian region

and the rebooting of its mediatory role influence in the region that culminated in the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel and a clutch of Arab oligarchies. This time around, the US role will be of a full-fledged protagonist, which may involve a long-term military presence in the Levant as well. Trump has already indicated that he's in no hurry to pull out the US troops from Syria. In Beirut, the US is constructing one of its biggest embassies worldwide.

Trump spoke harshly about Iran and hinted at his readiness to use military means, if need be, to ensure Tehran will not develop nuclear weapons under any circumstances. Trump doubled down on the "maximum pressure" strategy to reduce Iran's oil exports to zero. On the other hand, he left the door open for negotiations – provided Iran is amenable to the American conditions. Trump's thinking is anchored on the belief that the Israeli military operations against Hamas and Hezbollah and the regime change in Syria have significantly weakened Iran's capacity to flex its muscles.

Trump commended Saudi Arabia's positive role and anticipated its recognition of Israel as a distinct possibility. Trump claimed that several regional states are also willing to get on board the Abraham Accords.

Quite obviously, these are early days. Netanyahu disclosed that Trump will be consulting his aides as to how to go about developing the concept. Meanwhile, he vaguely signalled that he may not undermine the 3-stage plan for Gaza ceasefire, although the degradation of Hamas will remain a work in progress.

To be sure, Hamas will outright reject the US-Israeli plan. A Hamas delegation led by the deputy chairman of politburo, *Mousa Abu Marzook* went to Moscow in the weekend. The Russian foreign ministry said on Monday that the presidential special envoy for the Middle East and Africa, Deputy Foreign Minister *Mikhail Bogdanov* received the Hamas delegation and the two sides "stressed the importance of continuing systematic efforts to achieve inter-Palestinian unity as soon as possible, focusing on the political framework of the *Palestine Liberation Organization*, which envisions the establishment of an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital."

Clearly, Russians were clueless about Trump's impending announcement. Bogdanov also re-

ceived Israeli ambassador *Simona Halperin* later on Monday. The foreign ministry said "special attention was paid to the implementation of the agreement between Israel and the Hamas movement on a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip and the exchange of hostages. The Russian side confirmed its commitment to continue vigorous efforts aimed at the early release of those held in the enclave."

Saudi Arabia has reacted sharply that it would not establish ties with Israel without the creation of a Palestinian state, stressing that its position over this issue is "firm, non-negotiable and unshakeable." The Saudi statement said Crown Prince *Mohammed bin Salman* has underlined the Kingdom's position in "a clear and explicit manner that does not allow for any interpretation under any circumstances".

The unusually lengthy Saudi statement said Crown Prince declared that Saudi Arabia "will not cease its tireless work to ensure the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. The Kingdom will not form diplomatic relations with Israel without this."

The statement reiterated the Kingdom's "categorical rejection of the violation of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people by Israel's settlement, annexation and displacement policies." It added, "The international community has a duty today to ease the deep humanitarian crisis that the Palestinian people are enduring. The people will continue to cling on to their land and their determination will not be shaken."

Furthermore, the statement stressed, "Permanent and just peace cannot be achieved without the Palestinian people receiving their legitimate rights in line with international resolutions and this issue has been clearly stipulated to the previous and current American administration."

There has been an *avalanche of criticism worldwide*.<sup>2</sup> Prima facie, Netanyahu lured Trump into a trap by enticing him with a seductive scenario of massive lucrative business in Gaza's reconstruction. Trump's imagination is running riot, completely disconnected from ground realities. Such naïveté is fraught with real danger of blowing up on his face sooner rather than later and turn into an albatross for his presidency. This has all the making of a quagmire for the Trump administration.

Netanyahu is the winner here. Actually, the camera caught him smirking more than once while Trump was holding forth on his dream project of the “Riviera of the Middle East”.

The one tangible achievement for Netanyahu out of all this, nonetheless, is that a US retrenchment in West Asia is simply out of the question now, and, secondly, he can claim, back home in Tel Aviv, that Trump has his back. The arch sur-

vivor probably gets another lease of life in the shark-infested waters of Israeli politics.

Source: <https://www.indianpunchline.com/netanyahu-entraps-trump-in-a-quagmire/> 5 February 2025

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.indianpunchline.com/trump-turn-is-bad-news-for-west-asia/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5108726-trump%E2%80%99s-gaza-strip-takeover-plan-draws-criticism%25C2%25A0>