

# Gaza reconstruction; Ukraine reconstruction – ‘It’s all business’

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## ***Everything is ‘business’ in Trump’s geo-politics.***

Over the past two weeks, two important messages were conveyed to Iran, both of which were rejected.

One came from the U.S. and the other from Israel. The former was: “*We [the U.S.] will carry out a limited attack and you should accept it; or at least, give only a symbolic response*”. Tehran rejected this request, saying that it would consider any attack to mark the beginning of a full-scale war.

Israel’s message, delivered through one of the various mediators, was: “*We will not participate in the American attack*”. It asked Iran therefore, to not target Israel. This request also met with a negative response, together with the explicit clarification that were the U.S. to commence military action, Israel would be immediately attacked. In parallel, Iran informed all states in the region that any attack launched from their territory or airspace, would result in an Iranian attack on whomsoever facilitated such U.S. military action.

As background, the Iranian perception of threat of U.S. military action has moved beyond the level of a manageable threat, to that of an *existential threat*. Consequently, writes Iranian analyst Mostafa Najafi, Iran’s leadership has “*concluded that a U.S. attack — even if limited in scope — [would] not lead to the end of a conflict ... [Rather, it would] result in the continued shadow of war and increased security, economic, and political costs for the country. On this basis, a comprehensive response to any attack, even whilst accepting its consequences, is viewed as a strategy for restoring deterrence and preventing the continuation of sustained military pressure*”.

It seems, given the report by Israeli Channel 14’s Hallel Rosen on the talks between the U.S. Commander of CENTCOM General Cooper and his Israeli counterparts on 25 January, that Cooper and his team told their Israeli colleagues that the U.S. Administration were seeking only a ‘clean, quick, and cost-free operation in Iran’ – one that would not require a significant drain on resources, nor result in the U.S. becoming entangled, nor slipping into widespread complications inside Iran.

Iran, of course, is not Venezuela. It seems that Trump's quest for an 'In-Boom-Out' standout operation for Iran is proving elusive. It carries too high a risk of a bad look – not playing as a 'winner' – especially at a time when Trump's approval rating is suffering.

U.S. Envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner had arrived in Israel (from Davos, where they had focussed on both Ukraine and Gaza), to meet with Netanyahu on the Saturday that the CENTCOM team were in town.

No doubt Witkoff conveyed to Netanyahu – viewed from the political plane – Trump's hesitations about the prospective attack on Iran which General Cooper was outlining in Tel Aviv).

The principal message that Witkoff would have brought was Trump's invitation issued the same weekend both to Netanyahu and Putin to join Trump's *Board of Peace*(including its Gaza component).

Putin said he was ready to respond to Trump's *Board of Peace* invitation, subject to the documents being reviewed by his Foreign Ministry, and suggested too that Moscow could be prepared to pay the \$1bn fee required for permanent membership from Russia's frozen assets in the U.S., adding that additional frozen funds could also be drawn on for re-building "*territories that suffered during hostilities between Russia and Ukraine* [-] Once we sign peace deal".

Putin said that he planned to raise those latter ideas in a meeting on the following day, with Witkoff and Kushner, as well as with Palestinian President Abbas, who was scheduled to visit Moscow the same day.

World attention is being focused towards the apple of Trump's eye – the plan for the reconstruction of Gaza. This flagship project promoted by Trump, writes Anna Barsky in *Ma'ariv* (in Hebrew), "*aims to transform the Strip into a restored and prosperous civil entity, on the model of the Gulf states. Leading this vision are two of his closest advisers: Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff, who are pressing Trump to apply pressure on Israel to agree to begin reconstruction in areas of Gaza that are currently under IDF control, within the demilitarized zone*".

*"Whilst close advisors to President Trump are pushing for a rapid reconstruction of the Strip, Israel insists that without a full, real and irreversible disarmament of Hamas, there can be no reconstruction – not even in territory under IDF control ... [The Witkoff plan] thus represents an outcome that is completely contrary to Netanyahu's worldview, Israeli sources say ... According to them, the Prime Minister has not only a desire to prevent such a scenario, **but also has practical tools to do so**".*

*"Why is the Trump administration investing so much energy in rebuilding Gaza?",* Nahum Barnea, the doyen of Israeli political correspondents, asked of a man who was at the heart of the talks between the two governments in Trump's first year:

“Money”, the man replied. “It’s all business. Rebuilding Gaza will cost hundreds of billions of dollars. The money is supposed to come from Gulf states. Businessmen close to Trump are striving to get their share, in brokerage fees, in construction and evacuation companies, and security and manpower”.

“Wait, [Barnea] said. I thought Turkey and Egypt were eyeing the reconstruction money, not Trump’s people. [The man] smiled. Both. I’ll surprise you, he said. Israeli businessmen are also showing interest. They believe that some of this good stuff will fall into their hands”.

Barnea was amazed: “The deniers who destroyed the houses in Gaza will clear its ruins, build its cities. Happy Ending!”

So here it is possible to see how things are shaping up. The question that preoccupies the political echelon in Israel is what happens should Trump determine that the Gaza reconstruction project will be promoted *without Israeli consent*:

Be aware, “Kushner and Witkoff do not see themselves as ‘decorations’. They have a coherent vision for Gaza, and it is very much in contrast to the Israeli vision”, Barsky quotes her high-level source saying.

Barnea wryly observes: “Netanyahu will make sure to bluff out phase two of the plan”. Yet, Barnea’s friend smiled: “There may not be reconstruction; [but] there will be money”, he said.

President Putin, no doubt, sees all this. And guess what? As Witkoff and Kushner arrived in Moscow, keen to discuss Putin’s *Board of Peace* membership acceptance, the former were accompanied by Josh Gruenbaum, another Jewish American investor — a new, active member of Trump’s negotiating team — who had come to negotiate with Netanyahu for post-military control of Gaza under Trump’s *Board of Peace*. (Gruenbaum has just been made a senior adviser to the *Board of Peace*).

Witkoff, Kushner and Gruenbaum plainly care deeply about the real estate project in Gaza. Putin must see that.

Putin likely has the U.S. Administration’s pulse. It was him, after all, who suggested that some of Russia’s frozen funds could be used to rebuild ‘territories that suffered during hostilities between Russia and Ukraine’. Trump at Davos hinted at a \$800bn reconstruction fund for Ukraine – not as an outright grant (much to Zelensky’s chagrin), but to be conditioned on Ukrainian withdrawal from the Donbas – which Zelensky refuses.

Zelensky however, badly needs money now (as grift to pass around his following). And Witkoff and Kushner need Putin’s backing to unlock the Gulf money for Trump’s ‘signature project’ – the rebuilding of Gaza. They also need Putin’s support to push Netanyahu into finally initiating Gaza Phase 2.

Putin met President Abbas just ahead of his meeting with Witkoff, Kushner and Gruenbaum. Putin has leverage here; he did, in his initial *Board of Peace* response, notably underline the importance of UNSC decisions on Palestine. If Witkoff wants Putin's political heft to bring about the reconstruction of Gaza – against Netanyahu's interest – the Palestinian dimension will have to come into play, one way or the other.

Ushakov, Putin's aide, noted too that the 'situation of Greenland was discussed'. More leverage? Joint U.S.-Russian exploitation of the Arctic dangled before the business trio?

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