

Israel's divide and conquer po



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The potential for the Jewish people to regain their historic commercial role across the Arab world is immense

I recently attended the International Institute for Strategic Studies Manama Dialogue session, where Omani Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi gave a full-throated defence of establishing relations with Israel. I have to admit to being in two minds. I've always been an advocate of dialogue for achieving a just peace for the Palestinians; but does Oman's unilateral initiative leave us closer or further away from this goal?

Benjamin Netanyahu's unexpected arrival in Muscat represented a major PR coup for Israel's prime minister. Netanyahu got his diplomatic breakthrough with an Arab state; he was strengthened at home at a time when multiple corruption cases threaten to drag him down; yet with zero expectation that this breakthrough exacts any benefits

for the Palestinians.

On the contrary, such a step implicitly legitimises the surrender of Jerusalem — a city that is not just significant for the Palestinians but sacred for the entire Islamic world, along with its distinctive Christian and Arab heritage. This also risks sending signals to Jared Kushner that the White House's "deal of the century" can jettison even token concessions to the Palestinians, as if Israel gets everything and the Arab world — which for 70 years has championed the Palestinian cause — will simply look away.

Historic agreements signed between Israel and the states of Egypt and Jordan never led to a thawing of relations, bilateral trade, mutual trust or an end to popular hostilities. These agreements instead provided diplomatic cover for an intensification of Israel's war of attrition against the Palestinian people. They led the settlement movement to grow from a radical fringe to a tidal wave that today has flooded the entire West Bank, leaving Palestinians clutching to an isolated cluster of micro-cantons with

the same potential for coherent nationhood as the scattered Pacific islands of Micronesia.

For decades, Israel has been an inward-looking, defensive state, which sought to expand and prosper through the theft of Arab land, one olive grove and one street at a time. If its blinkered leadership abandoned such petty acts of plunder and looked outwards to the wider region, then the potential for the Jewish people to regain their historic commercial role across the Arab world is immense.

Historically, Arabs and Hebrews were all part of the same Semitic peoples. We spoke similar dialects from a common linguistic pool and the question of whom Palestine belonged to wouldn't have made sense to these ancestors, because so many related tribes and peoples farmed or pastured their herds across these ancient lands. A genuine, just peace would restore such a diverse society, where Muslims, Jews, Christians, Druze, Kurds and others abandon ridiculous pretensions of unique, ethnic superiority or exclusivity

and recognise one another's right to peacefully coexist and thrive. Perhaps such a comprehensive peace would also offer an opportunity to turn the clock back on recent losses in regional diversity of ancient Christian, Jewish and other minority communities.

Such a peace would mean trade, the sharing of technology, educational exchanges and cultural dialogue, not to mention the huge financial dividend when we stop spending a massive proportion of gross domestic product in defending ourselves against each other — thus advancing the security of the entire region. The proposal of building a railway between Israel and the Arabian Gulf is, in principle, a wonderful idea. However, this railway should not be built over the shattered bodies of Palestinians.

The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which has been re-endorsed repeatedly by the Arab League — most recently in 2017 — mapped the path toward such a just, comprehensive and warm peace. This proposal offered Israel a normalised and full relationship with the entire Arab world in return



Oman's Sultan Qaboos meets with Israeli to the Gulf country.

'Criminals?' hardly: That's who the carava

The would-be immigrants to the US travelling from Central America are trying to escape rule by authoritarian govern



VICTORIA SANFORD

As thousands of Honduran migrants seeking asylum in the United States trek northward through Mexico, President Donald Trump has pledged to stop them at the border by militarising it with armed federal troops, under the guise of protecting Americans from "criminals" and an "invasion."

What he fails to recognise is that cruelty won't solve the current refugee crisis. Neither will buddying up with authoritarian leaders in Central America. Instead, those two strategies only deepen the crisis, because criminality and misrule are exactly what the caravan is fleeing.

What Trump calls an invasion is actually the visible face of a deadly crisis of governance and violence in almost all of Central America — a retreat from the rule of law in favour of rule by corruption and criminality abetted by officials with impunity.

For example, Trump supports President Jimmy Morales, his authoritarian counterpart in Guatemala. Morales is under investigation for possible corruption by the United Nations Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala. He has fought back by revoking the visas of many of the commission's investigators.

Currently, violence reigns in Honduras, Guatemala and El Sal-

vador; the three countries have the world's highest homicide rates, and the pattern they have set — daily killings, forced gang recruitment, extortion, gender attacks and kidnapping for ransom — may be creeping into Nicaragua.

The criminal groups behind this are a legacy of civil wars fought in the 1970s and 1980s, and of past military regimes that left 75,000 dead in El Salvador and 200,000 dead in Guatemala. Honduras, which has been a base for American military operations in Central America for decades, is now considered the most violent. Unlike Guatemala and El Salvador, it has never even had an official counting of the dead.

In those three northern Central American countries, military units are entrenched in a complex web of organised crime, drug trafficking, gangs, political parties and corrupt clandestine police groups.

The gangs have ties to the police — who hunt gang members if they don't pay their quota or become liabilities because they know too much after colluding with corrupt police officers. The gangs also have ties to organised crime and drug traffickers who, in turn, have their own ties to the military and the police.

In the 1980s, gang members informed the police about factory workers, union organisers, teachers and students involved in political protest. In exchange, the police granted the gangs neighbourhood territory for illicit activities. In Guatemala, after peace accords in the 1990s ended a dec-



Jerison Sol, his wife, Alicia Landaverde, who is pregnant, and their 15-month-old son are part of the group of Honduran migrants hoping to get to the United States.

ades long civil war, clandestine groups with ties to police and army officials used army routes, landing strips and heliports to transport weapons and drugs.

Guatemala's networks illustrate how tightly interwoven those systems can become. For example, gangs pay the police to ignore the gang operations in their territories. Those payments flow upward: Local police officers pay their boss, who in turn pays off his

boss. At the higher levels, drug traffickers might buy the services of a very senior police officer, who in turn might then send payments downward, to individual officers.

Narco-traffickers and crime syndicates also pay off gang members to support illicit trafficking and to assert their power; the jobs vary from hit man, kidnapper, extortionist, arsonist, carjacker and recruiter of low-level supporters of criminal activities.

The interlocking power structures of violence, bribes, threats and patronage make everyday life extremely dangerous for Central Americans. Any interaction between gang members and ordinary citizens carries two meanings. The first: "Will you give me that money?" Answering "no" is seen as a direct challenge to the gang's power. The second: "Do you accept my control over your life?" Refusing to give up even one

Trump and Congress must strengthen those efforts and help them become a regional campaign to rein in rule by criminal cliques and murderous gangs that make daily life intolerable for the average citizen.

dollar can designate a person an enemy of the gang, which is a very dangerous position to be in.

Central American government: know all this. Their responses range from turning a blind eye to crime, to corrupt acceptance, to active complicity. Members of the elite work within and dominate these violent power structures. And many of these clandestine groups have ties to Mexico's horrifically violent drug cartels.

This dark picture of what Central Americans seek to escape is not a new experience in American immigration. It recalls other horrors that forced human waves — Irish, Italian, Greek, Jewish, Hungarian, German, Polish and more — to flee parts of Central and Southern Europe for America rather than endure violence, crime, discrimination, misgovernment and hunger in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Did America lose by welcoming them? Think about just how much those grateful newcomers have added