



Inside the Trump Administration’s Middle East Peace Effort

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ROBERT SATLOFF: Good evening, everyone. this is a very special evening. I’m delighted all of you could join us for this discussion about the Trump administration’s approach to Middle East peace. We’re going to spend the next 45 minutes in a bit of a strange conversation talking about something but not really talking about it. [laughter] Because tonight, unless we’re going to make even more news than I expect, tonight is not the big reveal. That day—it won’t be for another month at the earliest—but there is still quite a lot to talk about the Middle East peace process without actually talking about the Middle East peace plan. So, first, I just want to extend again my thanks to you, Jared, for joining us for this occasion. [applause]

JARED KUSHNER: Thank you, Rob. And thank you for having me. It’s an honor to be here with all of you tonight.

SATLOFF: So let’s begin with what you’re proposing. Is it? [applause] no, no. I’ve listened carefully to the statements that you’ve made and your colleagues have made. Will it be a plan, a vision, a framework, a proposal? Which one of these words is an accurate description of what we’re going to hear?

KUSHNER: So we could use a lot of different words to describe what it is that we’ve been working on, but we’re going away from all the typical diplomatic speak about ‘how do you describe things at a high level’. What we’ve put together over the last year is, I would say, more of an in-depth operational document that shows what we think is possible and how the people can live together, how security could work, how interaction can work, and really how do you try to form the outline of what a brighter future could be.

You know, I’ve worked very closely now for the last two years on this with Jason Greenblatt who’s been absolutely phenomenal, he is an amazing lawyer and with, obviously, David Friedman, who’s been a great ambassador and also was a great lawyer in his time and with Avi. And what we’ve done is we’ve been able to—we started by studying what had been tried and how people had approached this to date and why we thought in our estimation why it hadn’t been successful at the time. So the first phase was really an assessment phase. And

we did that by studying the different efforts. We read a lot of books. We spoke to a lot of people. We traveled around the region. We spoke to the negotiators who had been doing this for a long time. We spoke to the neighboring countries, and we really tried to pull from them what they thought could be an appropriate solution to this.

And so as with we got forward, we started saying, well, a lot of the discussion and a lot of the disagreement seems to be about these high-level concepts. I always found in my business career that when you'd have a dispute on a contract, you'd go into the details, and you could usually resolve things because that is what you do when you are motivated to move forward.

So we said why don't we just start writing things out, this happened early on, we said, you know, "Two State" versus "One State," you know, you can't say "Two State." I realized that means different things to different people. If you say "Two State" it means one thing to the Israelis, it means one thing to the Palestinians, so we said let's not say it. Let's work on the details of what this means. So we started writing down a document, and we started with five pages and made it to ten pages, twenty pages, thirty pages, and we kept refining it as we would get more and more input along the way. So I think what we've put together is a document that I do believe addresses a lot of these issues in a very detailed way, probably a more detailed way than has ever been done before. And what, hopefully, that will do is show people that this is possible.

If there are disagreements, hopefully, they can disagree about certain specifics as opposed to disagreeing about high-level concepts. If you look at a lot of past negotiations, they're basically trying to wordsmith documents to basically not agree but not admit that they don't agree. That's not an acceptable way to solve problems; that's how you defer problems.

I enjoy working for this president, but one of the things that I admire is he's not going to allow you to pretend something's solved when it's not solved. We should either solve it or admit that it's not solved and really try to work hard at putting a solution for it.

The second thing we started putting together was an economic vision for the region. and what we did is we start looking at the divide in the region. And, you know, when I was on the campaign, all the experts were saying, well, you have the Sunnis and the Shias, and that's the big divide with the Arabs. But what I see in the region is the big divide now is leaders who are trying to empower their people and create more opportunity for them to have a better life, and then you have leaders that are trying to repress their people, often using religion and other excuses as a reason to try and hold their people down. So when we looked at the Palestinians, we said, well, what are the opportunities that they can have? What's been holding them back economically?

Obviously, you have the core issues, because you need to resolve the core issues to be able to move forward. But what we started doing is we started building an economic vision for how do you take that region, and push it forward in a more substantial way. And so I think we built a very good business plan. We studied what they did in Poland and how that was successful, we studied South Korea, we studied Japan, we studied Singapore, and then we studied areas like Ukraine where they had a pretty good plan, but there was not very good execution, and a lot of the governance was off.

So what we will be able to put together is a solution that we believe is a good starting point for the political issues. And then an outline for what economically can be done to help these people start living a better life.

And I do believe this, is that there is a greater division between the experts and the people who negotiate this and talk about this and work at the think tanks and work in the negotiations than there is between the people. I think the people fundamentally want to live together, I think the people fundamentally want to have better lives. I think they want their kids to have jobs. They want to be able to pay their mortgage. And I think that's a very important underlier. And I think everybody wants to live with dignity.

The Israelis want to know they have security. That's important for this administration, Israel's security. And I think if we work it well and we put it out and people look at it with a fresh perspective, I think there'll be a lot of opportunity to start a new discussion and, hopefully, that leads to a breakthrough.

And I will just say this, this is a very hard problem. This is probably one of the hardest problems maybe that exists in the world. And when the president asks us to take this on, you know, Jason, David, myself, he says, no, I want you guys to really try to solve this. I don't want you to make an effort and then try to create a downside so you can blame somebody else if it fails, he says. I believe this is an issue that needs to be solved. He says I don't think if you solve this the rest of the region turns out well, but I do think you can't fix the whole region without this being resolved. And I do think that it's something that's held the region back.

If you think about just the Middle East, you think about what China's been able to accomplish between 2001 and today, they've built, you know, an amazing economy, They've built a great country, they've taken hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. If you look at the Middle East and what's happened with all the war and all the conflict and all the division, they basically stayed in place, maybe even gone backwards. If we can figure out how to change the paradigm and get people to focus on betterment of life and how do you create more opportunity, and somehow we have to break this cycle, I do think there's a lot of potential for them to get on a good path. There's a lot of wealth, there's a lot of resources, where it's located strategically a lot of really great people. So we're finding reasons to be optimistic, and we're giving it the best shot we can.

SATLOFF: So let me ask you two why questions—the big why and then the tactical why. I know you started to answer the big why, but I want to go a little bit deeper.

Recently at the “Time 100” event you explained that the administration had four big priorities in the Middle East. The first three, where I sit, certainly make a lot of sense: Confronting Iran, defeating ISIS, and combating the ideology of radical Islamic extremism. The question is about what comes up number four. If you had said solving the world's worst humanitarian crisis, Yemen, okay. If you had said solving the world's worst refugee crisis, Syria, okay. What makes solving the Israeli/Palestinian crisis—an important issue, to be sure—what makes that rise to the level of being at that high priority?

KUSHNER: So I would think that if you would have gone back five, six years and if you would have asked people what they thought was the biggest issue in the region, they would have said it was this issue. and I think that what I said at that last interview was that those were the four issues that we were outlining when we went to Saudi Arabia. And the president chose to take his first trip to Saudi Arabia, and he thought that it was important to really get everyone to come together to try to solve these issues and say that this is not America's responsibility, this is not Saudi Arabia's responsibility, this is all of our collective responsibility.

And I do think that on those first three issues we've made tremendous progress. if you think about what the president's done to get out of the JCPOA, the Iran deal, I think we've tried to do everything we can to make sure that all of the different areas where they're being aggressive—whether it's Yemen, whether it's Syria, whether it's with Hamas, whether it's Hezbollah—to make sure that we limit their resources so that they're not able to export terror in the way that they have done.

And the administration's been very clear with Iran. Is that we want to be able to work with Iran, but we want them to not be looking outward. And once they focus on trying to make their country better and improving their lives, we're happy to work with them on doing that, but they can't be infringing and trying to destabilize the whole region. That's been a very, very important issue for the president. And, again, they chant death to Israel, death to America, the same thing that the Houthis do in Yemen. So the Yemen issue, I think, is more an offshoot of the Iran issue, so I kind of put that in the same box because that's the root cause of what's happening there with the instability.

With regard to ISIS, when we came into this administration, the caliphate was very, very large, and ISIS was obviously in a stronger position. I think the president, you know, got together immediately, it was one of the first priorities he set out, and he said, "Look, we need a global coalition to figure out how to defeat this." I think he worked very well with his generals and he sat down, he studied the problem very carefully, and I think the progress we've made there has been unquestionably beyond people's expectations.

I remember seeing the news during the campaign about all the different things we were seeing every day, and it really was brutal, and now that's basically gone in a large part, the physical caliphate.

The third thing was something that I personally was much more passionate about, was with regards to, you know, the ideology and talking about, you know, you can kill a terrorist, you can kill a fighter, but how do you make sure that this isn't just spawning more and you're not dealing with this problem for much longer time to come? And I think that the work that we've been able to do with Saudi Arabia and with a lot of the Arab countries and with a lot of the leaders to really figure out how do you get information out, how do you win the war on the internet, how do you make sure that you're monitoring very closely who's preaching what and making sure that people are restoring Islam to what it should be as a religion of peace and as a religion of tolerance. And so I think we've made progress in terms of that.

There's been some good leaders that have worked with the president there. so I think that the progress there is also very good in two years.

With regards to this issue, again, we see this as, you know, Israel's a very special country. It's the only democracy in the region. It's America's strongest ally. They're a great military partner. We do a lot of business with them in a lot of ways, so Israel's security is something that's very important to this country, it's something that's very important to the president, and it's something that we want to see, we want to see that resolved.

And I do think that a lot of what we'll do here, in order for Israel to be secure long term, they need to resolve this issue. I think it's very important. You have to make compromises in order to do that.

I don't think anyone will question if we do ask Israel to make compromises in our proposal that we're going to ask them to do things that would put them at risk security-wise. I don't think the president would take—he would not take decisions himself that he would think would put America and the people who he represents at risk, and he wouldn't expect another leader to do that.

But he also thinks that if you're able to help the Palestinian people have dignity and have opportunity and create a new paradigm and break this cycle, he thinks that that's within the whole region's interest and also in America's interest.

We spend a lot of money in that region, our military cost is there. There's a lot of threat that comes from that region, and the more we can lead towards stabilization, I think that's a very important thing. And Syria is a very important issue as well, and I think that's something we spend time working on, and I know that Secretary Pompeo's been working hard to try to find what the correct outcome is there. And that's another one of the top priorities.

SATLOFF: Alright. Let me ask you the tactical why, which is: Why do you think the circumstances are right for a U.S. peace plan now? Administration officials have said from time to time that the plan wouldn't be presented until the time was right. Assuming that, as has been reported, that June 2019 is the time—give or take—what makes that the right time?

KUSHNER: Sure. So when I got in, people told me, you know, you're crazy to work on this, it's not the right time, this is impossible, it will never happen. so I don't think there's ever a perfect time to do this.

But I do think what we've been able to do over the last couple years is put ourselves in a position where we do feel like now is a good time to put something out there. I think that when we made the decision to recognize Jerusalem and the president asked, you know, will this make your job easier or harder, and the answer I gave him was, 'I think short term it's probably harder because people will, you know, be more reactive and emotional. They're not used to, you know, a president that A. Is keeping his word, taking tough decisions and doing what he thinks is right in that regard.' so I said, 'You know, this is going to be a different thing. But long term I think it helps, because what we need to start doing is just recognizing truths.'

And I think when we recognize Jerusalem, that is a truth. Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, and that would be part of any final agreement anyway—[applause] and I think that that was a very important component.

The same thing with recognizing the Golan Heights. Israel's had Golan for 52 years. It's been really peaceful since they've had it. Syria's kind of a mess right now. You've got a leader that's committed, you know, mass genocide and the territory's all disputed and broken up. So I don't think there's really any question that the Golan, when things are resolved, that it should be part of Israel. And so we recognize that too.

And I think we're in a position now—obviously, Prime Minister Netanyahu just won, I think, a very good election. He'll build, hopefully, a strong coalition, and we'll work with him to see what we can do.

And I do think that in the Arab world there's a lot of, there's a lot of impatience too with the Palestinian issue. The cause is kind of running dry a little bit with regards to, you know, people have been funding this thing for a long time. They've gotten more aid than any group of people in history. And what we have to show for it is really not much at this point, unfortunately. It's, you know, there are some people who have done very well, and maybe those people like the situation where the aid's coming in, and it's enriching, you know, a few at the top, but it hasn't trickled down to the people. And maybe that's been a disincentive for people to actually want to solve the issue.

So you have a lot of people who have been in charge of trying to solve it for a long time, and they have not—they have a perfect track record at not achieving a solution, and maybe they like it that way. I mean, I see them attacking the deal. They don't even know what's in it yet. And I think that maybe that shows they want the status quo.

So what we want to do is put something out that we think is based on logic where unquestionably we can say that this will lead to the Palestinian people living a much better life, and we hope that people will act rationally. And I do think it'll be a test for the Arab countries and it will be a test for the international community. Are they going to be stuck in reflexive positions that don't make sense and that have not created peace, or are they going to look at this for what it is, study it and say this makes sense, why don't you try to engage with it if you have, you know, problems with these details, sit down with them, try to change it. I do think this is a problem that deserves to be solved, and I am hopeful that, you know, the leadership from both sides will sit together and try to, you know, figure out based on the framework we provide how they can move forward.

SATLOFF: So you just made a reference to the leadership from both sides. There's really no ignoring the fact that one of the leaderships loves you—[laughter] and the other leadership publicly vilifies the administration. Is that an environment, from your experience, that's conducive to negotiating success?

KUSHNER: I would say that doing it the old way hasn't really worked, so, you know, our view was, you know, we are who we are, and we're going to say what we say, we're going to do what we think is right, and people will either react positively to it or they will react negatively to it. But at least people know that we're going to

be honest with what we do. And again, I think that, hopefully, people will be surprised when they see this that we've tried very hard to take a very, very difficult set of issues.

You know, I said this before, but I had a business mentor—whenever he had to take a tough decision, make a T chart—reasons to do something and reasons not to do something. And I think when both sides look at this and make the T chart and say, 'what am I giving versus what am I gaining,' I think they'd say there's a lot more benefit to doing this than not doing it. And that's the place I think you have to start.

When I speak to people, a lot of the stated position of Arab countries is, what we're going to do something along the lines of the Arab peace initiative. I say, that was a very noble idea in 2002 when they put it out, but if that would have been a recipe to create peace, it would have made peace 17 years ago.

And so, whatever deal we are going to make, I mean, you have the Palestinian position and you have the Israeli position, and whatever's going to be resolved has to be somewhat in the middle. So I think both leaderships are probably a little bit nervous to talk about what their potential compromise solutions could be. So our hope is that maybe we help them get a little bit closer by putting this out.

SATLOFF: So let me pursue that line of questioning for a moment. So you and Jason Greenblatt have said that the plan will answer all the core questions, and it will provide a vision of how life could be better for Palestinians and how the Israelis can achieve what they want most—security.

First, let's clarify this: When the president announced the move of the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem—a movement I supported, by the way—his statement included the following, "We are not taking a position on any final status issues, including the specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem or the resolution of contested borders. Those questions are up to the parties involved." So just to be clear, you're going to propose answers to those final status issues?

KUSHNER: That's correct.

SATLOFF: You will? Alright. Now, let's look at that equation—better life for Palestinians, security for Israel. For the Palestinians, it sounds an awful lot like quality of life enhancement. That sounds like money. A lot of money. Whose money are we talking about? Rumor has it that Middle East countries haven't been lining up to pony up to support this. Will there be a substantial American ante-ing up in order to trigger larger sums from others? How substantial are we talking about?

KUSHNER: Yeah. So since it's not my money to put out—[laughter] it's really, it's other people's money, it's—and, again, you have to be very mindful of rumors.

One thing I'm very proud of that we've been able to accomplish in two years is we've been able to keep this very close. We've had a leaky environment here in Washington where a lot of things leak, but nothing's leaked from my team, and nothing's leaked on this file, and I think that's something that we're very proud of.

I think that's built a lot of trust for us with a lot of our counterparts, you know? Whether it's in Israel, whether it's Middle Eastern countries. I think they've all seen that after talking with us directly, nothing's ever made it to the press. And I think that, over time, that built more trust and allowed us to have more productive discussions because they're willing to discuss things more freely which is very, very important.

So I wouldn't go off of what you – look, I think it goes like this. We have to decide—do we want to keep throwing money into a situation that perpetuates the situation and even makes it worse?

One of the things that I thought was very funny was they said, oh, we were accused of trying to separate the Palestinian people. I was reading a book on the Hamas/Fatah split, and they were accusing Hamas of the exact same things they were accusing us about ten years earlier. So I think there's a lot of different situations where the situation's just gone back and bad in a very, very bad way.

What I do believe is important for the improvement of people's lives is you need an environment where people can feel like they're able to invest, right? So the reality is I see so many well-intended programs through the different aid agencies and through different private donors and they get some entrepreneurs together, they get an industrial zone or whatever it is.

But the reality is that until you establish borders, establish security, have rule of law, have transparency, eliminate corruption, really enforce property rights, and put people in a position where people have an environment where they can make investments and feel comfortable about it, you're never really going to see that economy rise, and you're never going to see people's living standards rise, and you're never going to see people start to have the self-determination and the better lives that they've been talking about and wanting to get for a long time.

So I think that we have a real chance to do this. but I think the two have to come together. I have spoken to a lot of countries about supporting this. I've spoken with some members of Congress about supporting this, and we'll see. I mean, I think that it's something that, hopefully, I can get people to sign up for and so far I would say people are very happy with the work product we've put together.

I think they think it's very in depth, they think it's something—when you see it, you'll understand why it took us so long. And I think that's something that, hopefully, people will see as a thoughtful effort.

And, again, I'll say this too because I see a lot of commentary, and in Washington there's a lot of people with opinions, obviously—[laughter] but what I would say is that people should be, it's very easy to want to sound like a wise man in this business and to talk about why this is hard or why this could fail or what, you know, we're doing wrong.

But the reality is that I say my favorite quote that I read about the Middle East was somebody said in the Middle East the pessimists are usually right, the optimists are usually wrong, but it's the optimists that drive the change.

I think what, hopefully, people do is they'll look at all this stuff, and they'll say, you know, we want to help you push this forward. We think this is a good idea. We want to push both sides to figure out how to move forward instead of allowing them to find excuses to not move forward. And I think that's where we want to get to.

And I think that this framework will hopefully be—look, this has been stuck for, you know, a long time. you know, there hasn't been a lot of fresh ideas, there hasn't been any breakthroughs in a long time, and the reality is that the situation is getting more and more untenable. and so we didn't create a lot of the problems.

I showed up here two years ago, but I was given the assignment of trying to find a solution between the two sides, and I think what we'll put forward is a framework that I think is realistic, it's based on—its executable, it's executable, and it's something that I do think, you know, will lead to both sides being much better off. That was the way I approached it.

SATLOFF: Fair enough. you briefly referred a few moments ago to the concept of state, and I want to ask you about this. Ten years ago in a historic speech Prime Minister Netanyahu outlined his call for a demilitarized Palestinian state. He said, "In my vision of peace, two free peoples living side-by-side in this small land with good neighborly relations, mutual respect, each with a flag, an anthem and a government." Does that still apply in your view?

KUSHNER: Like I said, we're going to put out a very extensive document—[laughter] and I'm going to let you decide, and I'm sure you'll write something very interesting on it when it comes out. [laughter] [applause]

SATLOFF: Alright. Alright, alright. [laughter] Alright, let me ask you a different question. [laughter]

So during his election campaign, Prime Minister Netanyahu committed himself to begin the process of annexation of Israeli territory at some point. something that he had never publicly said before. What is the administration's view on Israeli annexation of territory in the West Bank? Would you have a problem if this was done before the plan was presented? Have you told this to the prime minister?

KUSHNER: So I have not discussed this with the prime minister, and I do hope that what will happen is, as he forms his government, we've been giving him space to do that. I do imagine that once there is a government formed, we'll start engaging on this process, and we'll have discussion. And I do hope that what we're doing—I said I hope both sides will take a real look at it, the Israeli side and the Palestinian side, before any unilateral steps are made, and I hope they'll assess it and see if they do believe that this is a pathway for a better future.

SATLOFF: So is it a fair statement to say that one can either have unilateral annexation or a negotiated solution but not both?

KUSHNER: You know, one thing I saw early on in this is that, is that there was a lot of—our team, we'd have a lot of issues that would come up every day. And I think a lot of maybe the past people who have worked on this file can relate to this where every day you're called on a different issue. They're doing this, or they're doing that.

I said to my team, 'guys, we're not in the rabbit-chasing business.' They said, 'these aren't rabbits, these are big issues.' I said, "well our job is to try to find a solution between the two countries,' and that's really the disease. A lot of things that are happening now are symptoms of the disease and our job is not to deal with the symptoms, that's for them to deal with between each other. But that's not our job as in the role that we're playing.

We believe our job is to try to propose something that could actually cure the disease. And if you cure the disease, a lot of the symptoms go away. Again, that's what we've been focused on. There's a lot of distraction.

You know, we reminded ourselves every day and we've done in the last two years that there's about a thousand ways to fail in this file, and we've tried our best every day to make the right decisions to try to push forward and give ourselves the highest probability of doing something that could make a difference, achieve a good outcome and try to avoid decisions and situations that will give us a pathway to achieving a bad outcome.

But, you know, again, if you were just taking the smart money bet, the smart money bet is that this is a tough problem, and it's been around for a long time. But, you know, I do hope we're able to change the paradigm and put something forward that gets both sides to very seriously look at the facts and try to navigate a way where they can allow their people to be better off for the long-term. And that's very important to the president, it's very important to the president, it's very important to me, it's very important to Jason, and it's very important to David.

SATLOFF: So you used the metaphor of curing a disease which is a pretty high bar for success. And I want to ask you about your definition of success. Is success actually resolving this problem, as you suggested? Is success the middle bar of getting the two sides just to engage on what you propose? Is success the lower bar of getting a quorum of Arab states to say this is serious and worthy of discussion? What, in your view, is a legitimate, reasonable bar of success?

KUSHNER: So you're being very Washington with this question—[laughter] right? But, you know, again, I'm not thinking about it that way. Our goal is to go in, we were asked to try and solve a problem, and so, you know, one of the things that the president's good at, is he's good at coming into a situation and being very flexible from the beginning to the end of it.

And my view is that what we've done is we've tried to develop a path, we've assessed it, we've tried to tailor-make a solution. One thing we've done very differently than what's been done in the past is, you know, I remember my first meeting out I met with the Israeli negotiator and the Palestinian negotiator, and I asked them, and I said, 'Well, let's take these issues, right? On this one issue, what is an outcome that you think you could accept and that you think the other side could live with?'

And he said, 'if you do this, you have to go back to 1917 to 1948 to 1967 to 1973.' And I just said, 'Look, we don't want to go through the history on this, I'm just curious here, today, in 2017, what's an outcome that works?'

Well he said, 'okay, the way you solve it is you need to get two people together, four people together, you need to go to Oslo, you need to go to Madrid.' And I said, 'You know, I don't want to talk about process. I just want to come up with what a potential outcome could be here.'

And what I realized is it's very tempting to kind of get involved in process and get involved in history and fight about things that are not operational to people's lives. And what we've tried to do is focus on a solution that we think is viable, and then the last phase is trying to figure out what is an appropriate process to try to achieve that as much as possible.

So, look, at minimum, hopefully people will look at this, think it's serious and change the discussion. I think the discussion has gotten stale. I think nothing's worked, and I do think that our approach has been, is that if we are going to fail, we don't want to fail doing it the same way it's been done in the past.

SATLOFF: You want to be original in your failure.

KUSHNER: Well—[laughter] hopefully, the goal is not to fail, but I think that what we want to do is figure out how to do this in an intuitive way. You have three people who are not from politics, not from diplomacy, and what we've tried to do is do this in a very rational way. And, hopefully, that is different.

And, again, I do think that both sides will look at this, hopefully both sides think it's a serious proposal, hopefully it stimulates discussion, stimulates thought and maybe leads to some breakthroughs that have been elusive for a very, very long time. And, again, you know, our number one goal is we want the Palestinian people's lives to get better, and we want Israel's security to be stronger, and we want both sides to be able to find a pathway to come together and figure out how to bridge some of these previously unbridgeable divides.

SATLOFF: Just on the equation you just laid out—Palestinian lives to be better, Israeli security to be secured. Is it not unreasonable for a Palestinian to hear that equation and to say, 'Where is my political aspiration in that equation? However I define my political aspiration.' Is it at least reasonable for them to say, 'I just don't hear—if I'm a Palestinian—I don't hear my political aspiration in the equation of my life being better and the Israeli security being secured.'

KUSHNER: Look, I'll just say this very straight, which is I think that the average Palestinian doesn't have a ton of faith in their government, they don't have a ton of faith in their neighbors, they don't have a ton of faith in Israel, they don't have a ton of faith in America, right?

They've been lied to for a long time by a lot of people, and I think they're at a place where I don't think they know what to believe or who to believe. So it's an unfortunate situation, but they've been pawns in a greater game in the Middle East for a long time.

You have a lot of Palestinians that were kicked out of Arab countries for whatever reason and put into the situation that they're in. Arab countries who claimed to fight for them and care about them wouldn't take them into their countries when they were refugees. So you've got a very twisted history there.

And I think that you've got, you know, a current situation where you've got Hamas, obviously, in Gaza which has just driven that place into the ground. I think it's really, I think the people are hostages to a terror organization, and that's an unfortunate situation. And then in the West Bank, I think you have people who are pretty repressed. And, again, I think that they question whether the leadership is actually looking after their interests or not.

And so, again, I think that for the Palestinians the political aspirations are important. I do believe what we'll put out will address a lot of their political aspirations and a lot of their dignity. That is important to us. But I just think they're at a point where they're not able to live the lives that they think they deserve because a lot of this has screwed it up for them. And I do think that we think about that a lot. And, again, instead of coming at this from the political lens and say, okay, let's jump into this and do the political negotiations that's been done before in the same way that it's been done before, let's focus on the Palestinian people.

We spoke to a lot of Palestinian people. We spoke to business leaders. We spoke to a lot of people, and we said, 'What is it that you're looking for?' and we tried to figure out how to design something that we think can be very acceptable to them. And the question will be whether the leadership has the courage to try and jump into it and try to achieve it and whether they have the intent for preservation or whether they have the intent for actually betterment of the lives of their people.

But, again, the strategic advantage we have now is we know what's in the plan. We believe that it's virtuous. We believe that it's something that is beneficial to both sides. And it's been very disheartening for us to see that the Palestinian leadership has basically been attacking a plan that they don't know what it is as opposed to reaching out.

If they truly cared about making the lives of the Palestinian people better, I think they would have taken different decisions over the last year, maybe over the last 20 years, but that's just my—but that kind of doesn't matter, right?

The neat thing about this is we're going to put it out. Everyone has a fresh opportunity to try to engage with it. And when we put it out, we'll be able to see what happens. And people, you know, have speculated a million ways who will be supportive, who will be not. We don't know.

I mean, we're talking to people, we've had a lot of discussions. I think people will be surprised what's in it, but I hope people act rationally which is they take what we put out, they read it, they look at it, they look at it for what it is, not for what it's not, and they say, 'has there been any better ideas put forward, is this real, could this work?' and based on that they push forward.

I mean, we're doing the best we can. and I just think, again, it's not like there's a door B that's been presented or that we've taken away from them or that's existed that has led them to achieve things that have been so good for them. We're just being realistic, and I think that's, unfortunately, the situation as we found it, but we're doing our best to try to find a solution that I believe will have a lot of opportunity for both sides.

SATLOFF: You referred to, a moment ago, to laying out the plan. I just want to ask you briefly about the rollout of the plan, since we're not going to get into the details of what's in the plan.

KUSHNER: I was going to go through the details. [laughter]

SATLOFF: Is the plan going to be a surprise to Prime Minister Netanyahu, to the leaders of Jordan and Syria—not Syria—Saudi Arabia and Egypt? [laughter] Are they going to be reading about it the same day we all read about it, or are they going to be briefed ahead of time, and will you welcome their input at all before the final, final version is delivered?

KUSHNER: Yeah. so, again, to date we've kept the details very close and the way that you know we've kept them very close is that nothing's leaked out. And I think that's been a great asset. you know, we're making the calls now. We're finally deciphering the process, how we're going to do it.

But I do think that all of our allies and partners will be very well consulted, and I do think hopefully we're putting people in position to make sure that they can be as supportive as possible. But that's not based on relationship, that's based on substance. And I do think that we'll figure out what it'll be.

But again, the good thing about what I do is that, you know, who I speak with and when we speak to them, you know, the people who need to know about it, but the people who don't need to know usually don't know about it. [laughter] So --

SATLOFF: You said so earlier, the smart money—[laughter] is on not success. After all, you're hoping to accomplish what every president since Nixon and every secretary of state since Kissinger has in one way, shape or form has tried to do. But the smart money is not on success, especially given the high bar that you've outlined, success is actual resolution of the conflict. Have you factored into your thinking the implications of failure? Failure has its own set of outcomes and has its own impact on the various parties. What do you think about the potential implications of failure?

KUSHNER: So one thing that's been different for me about being in Washington is that, you know, everyone in Washington can complain about the status quo, and then when you try to, when you try to put something in play to make something better, then all of a sudden everyone goes crazy about all of the things that could go wrong, and they talk about how things could also get worse.

Look, the reality of life is that if you want to make something better, you have to take a risk that it could get worse. And our goal is to figure out how do we mitigate the downside and how do we do everything possible to try to achieve the upside.

I just think what we're doing here is we've been—and we've been doing this for two years, we've just been telling the truth. and I think, again, with our actions we're telling the truth, we're dealing with reality. And when you do that, I think that it usually leads to a better place.

So we're pretty confident that we'll put this out, it'll be a good basis for discussion. Again, success can look like a lot of different things. It can look like an agreement, it can look like a better discussion, it can lead to closer cooperation, maybe resolve a couple issues. Maybe not.

But, you know, I just think that the situation is such right now that I just think that it has to move forward. And I do think that not trying is a big problem too.

And I do think, too, and I learned this in business, and I think people in politics have a harder time with this, but sometimes doing nothing is a decision. Doing nothing is a decision. And we don't think that that's usually an acceptable decision unless we're doing it intentionally. And I do think here that the status quo and where it's headed to is not the ideal situation, and we just hope that what we put out has a lot of different pathways that could potentially make this better.

SATLOFF: So just on this point, because a very wise, some will even say brilliant observer of the peace process recently wrote, and I paraphrase—[laughter] “Issuing the Middle East peace plan in the current environment is a lose/lose proposition.” [laughter] “If rightists in Israel build upon a Palestinian rejection to push for annexation, the plan could unleash forces that drive a stake in the heart of U.S./Israel relations while destroying Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation, perhaps even the Palestinian Authority.” Is that at least a potential outcome?

KUSHNER: I just want to say it's so much easier being a writer than it is to be someone actually trying to solve a problem. [laughter] [applause]

You know, it will be what it will be. And I think that, again, we spend our time just trying to focus on what do we believe is the highest probability path that we can take to create a good outcome, and how do we do everything to mitigate bad outcomes.

You know, one thing I've seen in kind of, you know, in the building I work in is that it's not like you're faced every day with a problem and they say, “Okay, this is the good option and this is the bad option.” It's usually “This is the bad option and this is the really bad option,” and you're trying to figure out on all of these really tough problems which you've inheriting, you're trying to assess it.

Again, we've inherited a lot of problems on a lot of issues. Again, I've admired the way that the president and his national security team—not just on this issue, but if you look globally, we came into what we felt was a strategy-free environment. I do think that the president with H.R. McMaster, and now with John Bolton, have kind of taken the world and said these are our different priorities.

We've put together a national security strategy, we put together integrated strategies on how to get there. The president's taking on a lot of different files at once, and he can only do that because he's got a very strong vision, he's got a ton of energy, and I think he's got a very good team that's very well coordinated.

No whether it's Secretary Pompeo, whether it's John Bolton, myself on a couple of files, whether it's Bob Lighthizer, whether it's Steve Mnuchin or whether it's Wilbur Ross—dealing with all the different trade issues, conflict issues, national security issues—I do think we have, you know, a very good team working with strategies. We're coordinated to try to figure out how do we create the best outcomes possible.

We're always looking, you know, America is a great country. I've come to really appreciate what our place is in the world, what our influence can be in the world. I think that especially on the trading side, I think our president's brought a fresh approach which was badly needed. I think that a lot of these trade deals that we're doing should have been rebalanced a long time ago, and I think it took somebody disruptive, like this president, and a great trade negotiator, like Bob Lighthizer, to come in and really shake things up and figure out how do you do it.

And in each one of these trade negotiations, too, people were predicting all the things that could go wrong, and you put tariffs on and there's retaliation. But the reality is that the president understands how to calibrate risk, and he understands the power of the American market, and he has not gotten us into any wars. He's been able to—he's trying to figure out how to draw us down from wars, but he's been able to figure out how to reestablish America's place in the world but figure out how to balance some of these relationships that are out of whack.

I guess that's a little bit of a rambling answer from what you asked, but we come in, every day and we look at all the different challenges, and we're trying to figure out how to achieve an outcome. And again, it's very easy to prognosticate and talk about how everything you do has the potential to go wrong, but we've got a lot of really smart people in the government, and everything we do is peer-reviewed, and we challenge each other. We do it respectfully now, whereas it used to happen in the press with some of the different people, but now it's a very collaborative group. Not everyone agrees with each other, but the president likes it that way. Ultimately, at the end of the day, there's one decision maker, and that's the president.

SATLOFF: This is precisely where I want to end our conversation, with just a couple of final quick questions. Has the president read the plan? [laughter]

KUSHNER: So the president has been involved from the very beginning, and again, this is one he asked me to work on because it was an issue he wanted to see engaged with. So one thing working for this president—it's actually amazing because he's got, I think he's definitely increased the metabolism of government in the sense that he's got so many different cabinet secretaries and administration officials working on so many different files, and he's on top of all of us. So he's involved with the details.

He's been pushing us, we've been reporting back to him with regularity. He's read a lot of the parts of it, he hasn't seen the latest draft because we've still been refining, but the president's been very involved in creating this, creating the strategy, and he's a very hands-on leader. And that's been a lot of fun to work with him on it, because this is one that he does care about it, and he would like to see us go forward with in a good way.

SATLOFF: So lastly, sometime before you go public I assume there will be some Oval Office meeting or a Mar-a-Lago family dinner, perhaps—[laughter] where the president turns to you and asks, 'Okay, Jared, honestly, what's your opinion? This plan is going to have my name on it. Is this going to be a winner? You know I like winners. I really, really hate losers. Which is this? We don't have to do it. Is out worth it?' [laughter] So—is it worth it?

KUSHNER: When you work for a president, you try hard not to disappoint, but you can disappoint. When you work for your father-in-law, you can't disappoint. [laughter] [applause] So I, I think I've established a good track record now on all the different tasks he's given me. I've come back with results, and I've come back with good advice, and I do think that this is something that I do think he'll be proud of.

This is something that I think will be a document that I think will be elevating the discussion on an issue that's hard. And I think that when you're in the White House, I think the biggest mistake is not to try to solve hard problems. And what I learned on criminal justice reform, what I learned doing the Mexico-Canada deal which, again, everyone said we were never going to get a deal with Mexico, and the last minute we got the deal with Mexico, and everyone said, well, you'll never get a deal with Canada. And then we got a deal with Canada, and I did the same on criminal justice. People say, oh, just because you got criminal justice, why do you think you can work on immigration? I said, well, if you're in the White House where we are, you're supposed to try hard to solve hard problems. And if you're not spending your time trying to solve hard problems, then you're wasting your time.

And I think that this president is not afraid to fail at things, and he's not somebody who's sitting there saying, well, what's the political calculus on this or that.

He's saying this is what I think is right, this is what I think wrong. I think that's what the American people like about him. And he's willing to let us swing big at hard problems as long as we're doing it in a smart and responsible way. So I do think this is something the president will be proud of, I do think this is something that hopefully the community will look at.

And, look, I think that, hopefully, people should root for this to succeed. People should want this to succeed. I think people should want people to take these issues that maybe have held them apart for a long time and say, okay, you know what? Both parties have to give a little bit, but you'll gain a lot more than you give, and that's how you make deals, and compromise is important. And that's a noble thing.

I think the president will lay out a framework that I think is very defensible, that I think is something that has a lot of new ideas in it and is something that I think he'll be very proud of and, hopefully, does lead to some breakthroughs. So I personally am very honored that he asked me to do this. It's been very interesting working on this file.

I'm doing a lot of things these days that I never thought I would be doing in my life—this is not the plan I had. But I think it's an honor to work on it. And if we can make breakthroughs that can help people live better lives and live safer lives, then there's nothing more noble than trying to pursue peace between people even though it's really hard.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in thanking [applause] Mr. Jared Kushner. [applause] Thank you very much. [applause]