



● Above, an artist's impression of a plan to rebuild Gaza which was proposed by Prof Joseph Pelzman, inset right, an internationally recognised trade economist at George Washington University, last summer

Trump's start-from-scratch scheme to resurrect Gaza from the rubble inspired by futuristic 'Riviera' proposal

● After last week's dramatic idea, there will be no going back to business as usual in the Middle East



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Just when we thought Donald Trump had exhausted our capacity for shock, he does it again, nonchalantly announcing on live television that the United States was going to assume control of Gaza. For most people, it was a "do not adjust your set, adjust your brain" moment.

If at that precise moment Trump had also announced the winning numbers for next week's lottery, or the third secret of Fatima, nobody would have heard him, because in a cacophony of different global languages, everyone was responding with various linguistic versions of "WTF?".

When people recovered their composure, what most wanted to know was: where did this idea come from? Well, with a little digging, I may have the answer.

Last July, Professor Joseph Pelzman, an internationally recognised trade economist at George Washington University, wrote an interesting document called "An Economic Plan for Rebuilding Gaza". Its purpose was "to approach the problem from a

purely economic viewpoint", because, the report says, the destruction of Gaza was so extensive it is beyond repair, so "you have to destroy the whole place, you have to restart from scratch".

To do this, he concludes, "the area needs to be completely vacated so that the destroyed concrete can be recycled".

The costs of this massive reconstruction project "will range from \$1tn to \$2tn and take five to 10 years to complete".

Pelzman sent an outline of his ideas to both the Biden and Trump teams last summer. Only Trump's people replied, asking him "to think outside the box on what do we do after the war, as nobody was really talking about it".

So now we know where Trump's "Gaza Riviera" plan comes from.

More generally, however, trying to make sense of Trump's outlandish plan for Gaza involves distinguishing between signal and noise. It's an onerous task at the best of times, but is made infinitely more difficult by the president's personality and unorthodox behaviour.

When trying to figure out what Trump is trying to say, it is critically important that one takes him seriously, but not literally. In other words, there is nearly always a method in his madness. This is particularly the case in decoding Trump's Gaza gambit.

Apart from the appalling loss of civilian life, one thing that has always struck me about the recent war in

Gaza is: why didn't more refugees leave?

When Putin started bombing the far less densely populated Ukraine, millions fled immediately, over 100,000 of them to Ireland.

Israeli leaders claimed they endeavoured to minimise the loss of civilian life, but even if you take them at their word, which few do, it is impossible not to kill civilians if you drop 2,000-pound bombs in a densely populated area.

About 100,000 Palestinians did flee the relentless Israeli bombing by escaping through the Rafah crossing to Egypt. These were the more affluent citizens who could afford to pay the hefty bribes that Egyptian border guards demanded.

But why didn't the Egyptian government open the border with Gaza to allow hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to escape what the Arab world and much of the West was calling a genocide by Israel?

For that matter, why didn't any neighbouring Arab states or the super-wealthy Gulf states offer to rescue the long-suffering Gazans and give them refuge?

“For seven decades, the Muslim states have used the Palestinians as pawns in the game”

There are two aspects to that conundrum.

First, based on bitter experience, Arab states consider the Palestinians to be fundamentally disruptive. They caused a civil war in Jordan in 1970 when tens of thousands of them were expelled by the Jordanian army to Lebanon. They caused further disruption there and were expelled again, to Tunisia.

Egypt wants nothing to do with Palestinians because Hamas is a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood won the presidential election in 2011, but the democratically-elected president Mohamed Morsi was overthrown a year later in a military coup led by Abdel El-Sisi, the current president. The Egyptians have been adamant that letting in hundreds of thousands of Palestinians could destabilise the state.

Second, for seven decades, the Muslim states have used the Palestinians as pawns in a game of pressing Israel and undermining its legitimacy.

They invaded Israel on four occasions in order to eliminate it, all in the name of preserving Palestinian rights. Except for Iran, that game is largely played out now.

Trump's priorities are to free the Israel hostages and stop the war. To that end, he pushed Netanyahu to conclude the first phase of the hostage deal. It worked, and he was duly praised, including by me.

However, the second phase of that deal is a much trickier proposition. It involves a fundamental contra-

dition: a permanent ceasefire (thereby allowing Hamas to reconstitute itself) in return for the release of all hostages is in total conflict with the objective of eliminating Hamas as a governing force in Gaza.

Trump sees the conflict in this binary choice and he doesn't like it — so he has come up with a completely curve-ball third option.

One of Trump's quintessential but under-appreciated instincts is his consummate ability to sense where his opponents' vulnerabilities lie. Once identified, he targets them relentlessly, usually with devastating effect.

In my view, this is what Tuesday night's TV performance was all about. But please note, this was not performance — Trump was being deadly serious. He was reading from an autocue, not riffing at a rally.

Since he descended the golden escalator in Trump Tower to announce his candidacy for president 10 years ago, he has relished his role as disruptor-in-chief.

Right from the start, he made the then outlandish proposal to build a wall to keep Mexican "rapists and murderers" out of the US.

There was a lot of noise over that, too, but what Trump was signalling was that illegal immigration was going to be the ace up his sleeve. This week's broad-brush plan for Gaza is another deliberately provocative move to shake up the Middle East.

There have been four wars in Gaza since Israel ended its occupation

there two decades ago.

Each one culminated in a ceasefire that in turn was ended by Hamas firing fusillades of Iranian rockets into civilian areas inside Israel.

Israel would then bomb parts of Gaza to smithereens, and when hostilities ended with yet another ceasefire, the international community would rebuild the place and pick up the tab.

The latest episode in this seemingly endless process of "wash, rinse, repeat" was the brutal Hamas invasion of Israel on October 7, 2023.

As a consequence, Trump is drawing a line in the sand and signalling to everyone that there will be no going back to this business as usual in Gaza.

Trump is also saying to the Arab and Muslim world that for seven decades "you've been offering nothing but political platitudes to the Palestinians".

To put it more colloquially, he is telling them that when it comes to the Palestinians, the Arab states are all fur coat and no knickers.

It's a classic Trump ploy. He is calling their bluff by saying: "If you don't like what I'm proposing, come up with your own alternative."

Could it be that through what is by any measure an outrageous proposal, the undoubtedly flawed instrument that is Donald Trump might be able to breathe new life and hope into a conflict that has defied resolution for decades? Stranger things have happened.