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California of the Middle East

The 'Wild East': A vision for peace and security

• By GOL KALEV

October 7 and the fall of Syria are not just an Israel issue. They represent a dramatic shift in threat assessment for Arab regimes and the West.

They underscored that the existential threat to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other Sunni regimes is no longer from the west, Israel, but, rather, from the east and north – Iran, Sunni extremism, Turkey – directly or through proxies, as well as other emerging powers in the east.

As we witnessed how rapidly regimes can change, how quickly forces can advance through the desert, and how intelligence and experts' analysis can fall short. A new and different thinking is needed:

The West's defense line can no longer be on Europe's Mediterranean shores, or on Israel's Jordan River. It needs to be in eastern Jordan and the Syrian desert.

The West's new defense line

This can be accomplished by blooming the empty desert: Creating a "Desert Riviera" that would attract new populations, bring in tourists, and incentivize economic development zones.

In addition, the rapid construction of an extensive wall spanning Jordan and Saudi Arabia should be considered, applying the recent experiences of walls built along the US-Mexico and Israel-Egypt borders.

Such projects would normally seem unimaginable and face insurmountable hurdles, but a perfect storm of conditions in 2025 provides a unique occurrence that removes those hurdles, unleash tremendous economic opportunities, and lead to peace.

The extraordinary number of workers needed would make such an undertaking unfeasible, given the global labor shortage. However, US President Donald Trump's Gazan



PRIME MINISTER Benjamin Netanyahu, US President Donald Trump, Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif Al Zayani, and UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed wave, after an Abraham Accords signing ceremony at the White House in 2020. Trump's templates benefit all actors, says the writer. (Tom Brenner/Reuters)

relocation proposal could solve this shortage immediately. This is even more so if the Trump proposal is expanded to 1948 refugees, as suggested in last week's article.

Another hurdle that would normally make such a project a nonstarter is the enormous funding needed. However, the wars in Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon created a global buy-in for the need for some sort of a Middle Eastern Marshall Plan, funded by the international community.

Egypt and the UN are already talking about a starting figure of \$53 billion. Rather than direct those funds to fixing what is not fixable and dumping money on charity programs that would only slightly allevi-

ate the suffering of Palestinians, one can direct the funding to the return-on-investment-driven "Wild East."

The third hurdle is security. Like the American expansion to the Wild West, the Arab expansion to the "Wild East" is not without risk, but the looming strategic threat from the east should be sufficient for the US-led coalition to prioritize addressing such tactical security issues.

Concerns that Hamas-indoctrinated Gazan laborers would collaborate with invading forces could be mitigated by proper dispersal along areas where labor is needed (it is a "blank canvas" project after all).

Moreover, Palestinian refugees who chose to "go east" are

merely a beachhead for other populations that would likely join them, given the economic benefits and revenue opportunities.

Ecological challenges of population density

In addition, the "Wild East" will address the global ecological problem of population density, flagged for years by the UN and EU, which therefore should help fund this project.

Stunningly, the Middle East population is concentrated in a relatively small parcel of land in the west toward the Mediterranean Sea, while there are desolate territories in the east that are virtually unpolluted.

While in America, populations dispersed over time to the

desolate areas, such a process has yet to happen in the Middle East. There is no "California."

The historic reason for this, other than political, has been that those mass empty areas are deserts and therefore were deemed uninhabitable. This all changed in recent years, as Israel developed cutting-edge agricultural technologies that effectively "cancel" the desert and make such areas just as habitable.

Therefore, partnerships between Israel and its Arab neighbors can lead to a massive economic resurgence not just for Jordan but for much of the Middle East.

It would also transform Palestinians who choose to go there from refugees facing security

and humanitarian concerns to pioneers taking charge of their destiny and advancing humanity through settling the "Wild East" desert.

Middle East prosperity leads to peace

Such economic development would shift the narrative of Middle East funding 180 degrees: from being charity-based to being merit-based; from being conflict-driven, such as the large European investment in NGOs that incite Palestinians, to being peace-driven.

Indeed, the "Wild East" is very much in line with the apparent shift in peace frameworks led by Trump: from conflict-perpetuating "divide the baby" templates that keep

everybody unhappy – "land for peace" and "two-state solution" – to win-win templates that benefit all actors: the Abraham Accords.

Moreover, it would symbolize the end of a century of Israeli-Arab conflict, as Arab armies and defensive posture would no longer be facing west but east. Indeed, the Jordan Valley's slopes in western Jordan are now of little strategic relevance for Jordan. The eastern desert is.

Such a shift could also bring the region back to the utopic peace mindset of 1920, when a pro-Zionist Hashemite Arab kingdom was being built alongside a Jewish state in the making. This was at the expense of Turkey, kicked out of the lands it held for centuries, not just by the British but also by the Hashemites – today's rulers of Jordan. This led to built-in Jordanian insecurity that, sooner or later, Turkey would be back.

The "Wild East" can end this insecurity, as it has enough economic incentives and strategic value to benefit all regional actors, including Turkey. Indeed, a deal can be structured that would address the needs of the various parties and therefore create long-term stability.

This is the type of deal that Theodor Herzl, the father of Zionism, envisioned, and nearly came to fruition in 1920 – before Europe plunged the region into a century of conflict.

This century of conflict should now be over, and the focus should be directed to the menacing threat to the Middle East, Israel, and the West that is coming from the east. Building the "Wild East" would go a long way to countering the threat and ushering in sustainable peace.

The writer is author of a new book, The Assault on Judaism: The Existential Threat is Coming from the West. He is also chairman of the Judaism 3.0 think tank and author of Judaism 3.0: Judaism's Transformation to Zionism (Judaism-Zionism.com).