



# Trump wants Egypt and Jordan to let in Palestinian refugees from Gaza. Here's why the idea is rejected

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DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — President Donald Trump's suggestion that Egypt and Jordan take in Palestinians from the war-ravaged Gaza Strip was met with a hard "no" Sunday from the two U.S. allies along with the Palestinians themselves, who fear Israel would never allow them to return.

Trump floated the idea on Saturday, saying he would urge the leaders of the two Arab countries to take in Gaza's now largely homeless population, so that "we just clean out that whole thing." He added that resettling most of Gaza's population of 2.3 million could be temporary or long term.

**WATCH: Gazans return to homes in ruins and begin clearing rubble as tenuous ceasefire holds**

"It's literally a demolition site right now," Trump said, referring to the vast destruction caused by Israel's 15-month war with Hamas, now paused by a fragile ceasefire.

"I'd rather get involved with some of the Arab nations, and build housing in a different location, where they can maybe live in peace for a change," Trump said.

Hamas and the Western-backed Palestinian Authority condemned the idea. Jordan's foreign minister, Ayman Safadi, told journalists that his country's rejection of the proposed transfer of Palestinians was "firm and unwavering."

The temporary or long-term transfer of Palestinians "risks expanding the conflict in the region and undermines prospects of peace and coexistence among its people," Egypt's foreign ministry said in a statement.

There was no immediate comment from Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right governing partners have long advocated what they describe as the voluntary emigration of large numbers of Palestinians and the reestablishment of Jewish settlements in Gaza. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who is now a crucial member of Netanyahu's governing coalition, called Trump's proposal a "great idea."

Human rights groups have already accused Israel of ethnic cleansing, which United Nations experts have defined as a policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove the civilian population of another group from certain areas "by violent and terror-inspiring means."

Omar Shakir, the Israel and Palestine director at Human Rights Watch, said Trump's proposal, if implemented, "would amount to an alarming escalation in the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people and exponentially increase their suffering."

## A history of displacement

Before and during the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation, some 700,000 Palestinians — a majority of the prewar population — fled or were driven from their homes in what is now Israel, an event the Palestinians commemorate as the Nakba — Arabic for catastrophe.

Israel refused to allow them to return because it would have resulted in a Palestinian majority within its borders. The refugees and their descendants now number around 6 million, with large communities in Gaza, where they make up the majority of the population, as well as the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

In the 1967 Mideast war, when Israel seized the West Bank and Gaza Strip, 300,000 more Palestinians fled, mostly into Jordan.

**WATCH: Aid worker describes 'dire need' of children in Gaza amid delicate ceasefire**

The decades-old refugee crisis has been central to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and was one of the thorniest issues in peace talks that last broke down in 2009. The Palestinians claim a right of return, while Israel says they should be absorbed by surrounding Arab countries.

Many Palestinians view the latest war in Gaza, in which entire neighborhoods have been shelled to oblivion and 90 percent of the population have been forced from their homes, as a new Nakba. They fear that if large numbers of Palestinians leave Gaza, then they too may never return.

Steadfastly remaining on one's land is central to Palestinian culture, and was on vivid display in Gaza on Sunday, when thousands of people tried to return to the most heavily destroyed part of the territory.

## A red line for countries that made peace with Israel

Egypt and Jordan fiercely rejected the idea of accepting Gaza refugees early in the war, when it was floated by some Israeli officials.

Both countries have made peace with Israel but support the creation of a Palestinian state in the occupied West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem. They fear that the permanent displacement of Gaza's population could make that impossible.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi has also warned of the security implications of transferring large numbers of Palestinians to Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, bordering Gaza.

Hamas and other militant groups are deeply rooted in Palestinian society and are likely to move with the refugees, which would mean that future wars would be fought on Egyptian soil. That could unravel the historic Camp David peace treaty, a cornerstone of regional stability.

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"The peace which triggered the war."

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Jordan, which classifies refugees, the major

Israeli ultranational

view as the biblical heartland of the Jewish people. Jordan's monarchy has vehemently rejected that scenario.

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# Can Trump force Egypt and Jordan to accept refugees?

That depends on how serious Trump is about the idea and how far he is prepared to go.

U.S. tariffs — one of Trump's favorite economic tools — or outright sanctions could be devastating for Jordan and Egypt. The two countries receive billions of dollars in American aid each year, and Egypt is already mired in an economic crisis.

But allowing an influx of refugees could also be destabilizing. Egypt says it is currently hosting some 9 million migrants, including refugees from Sudan's civil war. Jordan, with a population of less than 12 million, is hosting over 700,000 refugees, mainly from Syria.

U.S. pressure would also risk alienating key allies in the region with whom Trump has had good relations — not only el-Sissi and Jordan's King Abdullah II, but the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, all of whom support the Palestinian cause.

That would potentially complicate efforts to broker a historic agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel to normalize relations, something Trump tried to do during his previous term and expects to complete in his current one.

*Associated Press writers Samy Magdy in Cairo and Tia Goldenberg in Tel Aviv, Israel, contributed to this report.*

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