



Trump's Economic Zone in Southern Lebanon: A Project to Contain the Resistance and Undermine Sovereignty

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Southern Lebanon occupies a strategically advanced position in the dynamics of the Arab- (Zionist entity) conflict, as it has remained since 1948 an open arena for invasions and aggressions by the (Zionist entity). Following the occupation of Palestine and the displacement of its people, southern Lebanon became the immediate border with the (Zionist entity), making it the first line of contact in all subsequent confrontations. The first of these took shape in the 1978 Litani Operation, when forces of the (Zionist entity) invaded the south up to the Litani River under the pretext of striking Palestinian resistance bases. That war led to the issuance of United Nations Security Council Resolution 425, which called on the (Zionist entity) to withdraw immediately from occupied Lebanese territories, urged respect for Lebanon's sovereignty, and established the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to monitor the ceasefire.

However, the (Zionist entity) ignored the resolution and continued its interventions and attacks until it launched the major invasion of 1982, reaching Beirut and resulting in the occupation of large parts of Lebanon that lasted until 2000. During that period, the Lebanese resistance movement emerged as a national liberation force against the occupation, and through escalating operations it succeeded in imposing a war of attrition that ultimately compelled the (Zionist entity) to withdraw from most Lebanese territories in 2000—the first withdrawal by the (Zionist entity) achieved through armed resistance rather than negotiation.

The confrontation, however, did not end there. In the July 2006 war, the (Zionist entity) sought to dismantle the resistance's capabilities, but the results were the opposite: the south was transformed into a symbol of Lebanese and Arab victory, as the (Zionist entity) failed to achieve its military and political objectives. Thus, southern Lebanon became more than just a border geography; it turned into a symbol of national sovereignty and the rejection of external dictates, embodying the notion that development and sovereignty are inseparable from the essential and necessary deterrent power to ward off external threats, foremost among them the (Zionist entity)'s occupation.

Within this historical context, any project that seeks to redefine the role of the south carries significant implications- especially if it is a new American initiative cloaked in the rhetoric of "peace" and "prosperity." In this regard, the news outlet Axios leaked details of a plan prepared by the U.S. administration under President Donald Trump, entitled the "Trump Economic Zone." The plan envisions the establishment of a "developmental" area in southern Lebanon, funded by Gulf resources (Saudi and Qatari) and placed under direct U.S.

supervision. The declared objective is to transform the south from a battlefield into an investment sphere that promotes stability; the underlying aim, however, is to recalibrate domestic and regional power balances by sidelining the Lebanese resistance and redefining the strategic role of the south in a manner that serves the security of the (Zionist entity) and U.S. interests.

Although the project, according to Axios, is presented as a developmental initiative aimed at promoting stability and prosperity, it carries strategic, political, and legal dimensions that cannot be separated from the regional context or from the concept of sovereignty and the peoples' right to self-determination. **These dimensions can be summarized as follows:**

First: The Political and Strategic Dimension

The U.S. project named the "Trump Economic Zone" cannot be understood solely as a purely economic initiative; rather, it is part of a complex strategic vision that goes beyond the developmental dimension to touch the core of the conflict over the position of southern Lebanon and its role in the regional equation. This vision can be summarized as follows:

- 1- The project seeks to redefine the identity of southern Lebanon and transform it from an open resistance front against the Zionist entity into a developmental investment area conditioned on security calm. This shift is not merely technical or economic; it reflects an attempt to weaken the "combat legitimacy" that the resistance has accumulated over decades, by proposing an "enticing" alternative based on development in exchange for the disarmament or neutralization of the resistance.
- 2- The project falls within the broader U.S. perspective of crisis management in the Middle East through financial and economic instruments rather than costly direct military interventions. After Washington's failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, "economic guardianship" appears as a more flexible and effective tool to reengineer the political reality of states without becoming mired in the quagmires of direct military occupation.
- 3- On the (Zionist entity) level, the project constitutes a dual strategic gain: it ensures long-term calm on the northern front without the need for a full-scale war and brings Lebanon into the "peace tunnel," while simultaneously institutionalizing a form of "economic normalization" that absolves the Zionist entity from any substantial obligations on unresolved issues, such as the Palestinian refugee question, Lebanese prisoners, or repeated violations of Lebanese sovereignty- which have intensified unprecedentedly after the last war on Lebanon.

4- The proposed Gulf funding (Saudi–Qatari) is not a minor detail but part of a larger regional project aimed at forcibly integrating Lebanon into the so-called “Abrahamic Peace” framework. The assistance is not unconditional; it is contingent upon redirecting Lebanon’s economic structure toward integration into a regional market controlled by the United States and the Zionist entity, while weakening any components of a resistant or independent economy.

5- Domestically, the project places the Lebanese state in a difficult dilemma: either accept conditional development that undermines national sovereignty and disrupts internal political balances, or reject the project and bear the economic repercussions and political pressures from influential Arab and international actors. At its core, therefore, the project constitutes a “political-strategic time bomb” rather than an innocuous developmental plan.

Second: The Legal Dimension

From a legal perspective, the “Trump Economic Zone” project in southern Lebanon raises a set of fundamental issues that extend beyond the local dimension to touch upon the principles of public international law:

1-Indivisible National Sovereignty

Article 2, paragraph 1 of the United Nations Charter clearly enshrines the principle of equality in sovereignty among member states. Therefore, any arrangement to establish an economic zone under external supervision or conditional funding—especially if linked to security arrangements with an adversary such as the Zionist entity—constitutes a direct violation of this principle. In this context, it is worth noting the International Court of Justice’s advisory opinion on Namibia (1971), which confirmed that any form of non-voluntary control over the territory of a member state is incompatible with international law.

Development as an Independent Sovereign Right

The right to development is one of the intrinsic sovereign rights recognized by public international law. This was affirmed by the United Nations General Assembly in Resolution 3281 of 1974 (International Covenant on Economic Rights of Peoples), which considered development an “inalienable right” to be exercised “freely and without external interference.” This characterization aligns not only with international

frameworks but also with general constitutional principles that place development at the heart of state sovereignty as an extension of the right to self-determination. Consequently, linking development in southern Lebanon to any security or political condition—whether through disarming or neutralizing the resistance—constitutes a breach of the peremptory norm guaranteeing peoples’ sovereignty over their developmental path, and a violation of a well-established constitutional-legal principle in the international system.

3-The Danger of “Economic Mandates”

The proposed project raises deep legal and political concerns, as it embodies elements of disguised guardianship resembling neo-colonial practices, where control is exercised through economic and financial instruments rather than direct military occupation. Although this model may appear “soft,” it is more dangerous than traditional dominance because it cloaks external intervention under the rhetoric of development, prosperity, and stability, potentially transforming southern Lebanon into a new model of economic mandate administered by external powers under a developmental guise.

4-Violation of the Principle of Self-Determination

The right of peoples to self-determination is explicitly enshrined in Article 1 of both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of 1966. The Human Rights Committee clarified in General Comment No. 12 (1984) that this right is not limited to political dimensions such as independence or state formation but also encompasses economic and social aspects, namely the right of peoples to freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development without external interference. From this standpoint, the “Trump Economic Zone” project places the southern Lebanese society in a coercive dilemma: either accept conditional development subject to external guardianship or face systematic economic isolation. This approach does not reflect any separatist tendency; rather, it directly conflicts with the essence of the principle of self-determination as defined by international law—the freedom of peoples to manage their resources and development trajectory within the sovereignty and territorial unity of the Lebanese state.

5-Exceeding the Bounds of International Legitimacy

From a broader legal perspective, the project reproduces patterns similar to those applied in the occupied Palestinian territories, where the concept of “economic peace” was used to entrench Zionist entity control. Instead of addressing the root of the occupation, development and investment projects under direct external supervision were promoted

aimed at mitigating social tensions and keeping the population economically dependent, without granting them any real capacity to determine their developmental priorities or exercise sovereignty over their resources. Consequently, development, instead of serving as a tool of liberation, becomes a means of perpetuating control.

In this sense, the “Trump Economic Zone” project does not merely represent a developmental initiative; it is feared to constitute a new mechanism for indirect guardianship. By linking development to external political and security conditions, it transforms southern Lebanon into a model of “soft economic mandate” managed by external powers under a developmental façade. This model not only conflicts with the concepts of sovereignty and independent development but also undermines the very principle of international legitimacy, as international law is used as a tool to justify dominance rather than safeguard the rights of peoples.

Third: The Regional Context

The “Trump Economic Zone” project in southern Lebanon cannot be examined in isolation from the regional environment within which it may take shape, a complex setting characterized by rapid transformations on multiple fronts. The key aspects can be highlighted as follows:

1- The War on Gaza and Its Repercussions

The ongoing war in Gaza has reaffirmed a central equation: the Zionist entity is unable to impose stability through military force alone. Despite its qualitative military superiority, the confrontation has demonstrated that the resistance remains capable of obstructing Zionist entity projects. In light of this, the Zionist entity and its allies are seeking “economic outlets” that allow for purchasing stability through initiatives such as the “Trump Economic Zone,” effectively transforming development tools into substitutes for an unattainable military resolution.

2- The Abraham Accords and Economic Normalization

The “Trump Economic Zone” project in southern Lebanon is a direct extension of the normalization process initiated by the Abraham Accords in 2020 between the Zionist entity and several Arab states. These accords were not merely diplomatic arrangements but included cross-border economic and security cooperation projects. The Trump Economic Zone represents an attempt to draw Lebanon, at least partially, into this trajectory through the gateway of development conditioned upon security stability.

3- Previous “Economic Peace” Experiences

The idea of the “Trump Economic Zone” is not new, as it follows similar experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, where reconstruction projects and economic zones were imposed under direct external supervision. In Iraq after 2003, the economic structure was reconfigured through contracts with multinational companies and international financial institutions, turning development into a tool for perpetuating economic dependency rather than restoring sovereignty. In Afghanistan, development was linked to security and military conditions imposed by the U.S. occupation, making development projects part of a control strategy rather than a means to empower the local community.

This type of intervention falls, in legal literature, under what is termed “Economic Trusteeship,” whereby external influence is directly exercised over a state’s economic and financial sectors under an institutional or developmental guise that implies partnership. The result is that economic sovereignty is emptied of its substance, and national decision-making is restructured within externally determined frameworks.

Accordingly, the proposed project in southern Lebanon should not be viewed as a natural developmental experiment but as part of this global model of economic trusteeship, which cloaks dominance in slogans of prosperity and stability, while its essence is the reengineering of the economic space to serve the priorities of external powers.

4- Regional Balances in Syria and Iraq

The project cannot be separated from the Syrian and Iraqi contexts. The Zionist entity seeks to encircle the resistance axis through interconnected tools: the “Daoud Corridor” in southern Syria following the fall of the Syrian regime, pressure on supply lines through Iraq, and now an attempt to neutralize southern Lebanon economically. This linkage across the three fronts illustrates that the “Trump Economic Zone” is not merely a Lebanese issue but part of an integrated regional project to redraw the map in a manner that guarantees the security of the Zionist entity.

5- Trump’s Return and the Deal-Making Approach

President Trump’s return to the White House brought with it a revival of the “deal-making” approach as opposed to multilateral negotiations. The “Trump Economic Zone” in southern Lebanon falls within this framework as a proposed economic-security deal, not through the United Nations or a collective negotiation framework, but via a bilateral American initiative imposed on Lebanon under the pressures of regional and international realities.

Conclusion

The “Trump Economic Zone” project in southern Lebanon cannot be regarded as an isolated developmental initiative; rather, it forms part of a political— legal approach aimed at redefining the position of the south within the Zionist entity’s security framework. Despite being framed in rhetoric of stability and prosperity, its essence rests on a trade- off between development and sovereignty, effectively turning Lebanon’s sovereign right to manage its territory into a bargaining chip in the hands of Washington and Tel Aviv.

From an international law perspective, the project places Lebanon in an unbalanced equation: either accept conditional development subject to external guardianship, or reject it and face the resulting political and economic pressures. From a strategic standpoint, it represents a new attempt to redraw Lebanon’s geography to serve the so-called “economic peace” project tested in Palestine, which has proven not to yield lasting stability but rather to entrench dependency and weaken societies in preparation for displacement.

The real challenge lies in the fact that the project does not target the south alone, but the entirety of Lebanese national identity, by redefining the concept of development and transforming it from a sovereign right into a tool of coercion. Lebanon thus stands at a crossroads: either defend its sovereignty and pursue an independent developmental path consistent with international legitimacy and the right to self-determination, or acquiesce to a project that reproduces forms of economic trusteeship under a contemporary guise.

Between these two options, the future of Lebanon will be determined- not only as a state but also as part of the new political map of the Middle East, being drawn amid a tense and transformative regional environment.



تأسس مركز حمورابي للبحوث والدراسات الإستراتيجية عام 2008 بمدينة بابل (الحلة)، وحصل على شهادة التسجيل من دائرة المنظمات غير الحكومية المرقمة 1Z71874 بتاريخ 2012/12/25، بوصفه مركزاً علمياً بحثياً يهتم بدراسة الموضوعات السياسية والاجتماعية، فضلاً عن الاهتمام بالقضايا والظواهر الراهنة والمحتملة في الشأن المحلي والإقليمي والدولي، ويتعامل مع باحثين من مختلف التخصصات داخل العراق وخارجه، وتحتضن بغداد المقر الرئيسي للمركز.

- لا يجوز إعادة نشر أي من هذه الأوراق البحثية إلا بموافقة المركز، وبالإمكان الاقتباس بشرط ذكر المصدر كاملاً.
- لا تعبر الآراء الواردة في الورقة البحثية عن الاتجاهات التي يتبناها المركز وإنما تعبر عن رأي كاتبها.
- حقوق الطبع والنشر محفوظة لمركز حمورابي للبحوث والدراسات الاستراتيجية.

للتواصل

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