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Arab Peace Initiative II: How Arab Leadership Could Design a Peace Plan in Israel and Palestine

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Summary

Past peace processes in Israel and Palestine failed to offer long-term solutions to the conflict, but they showed what makes negotiations work. In the latest round of hostilities in Gaza, key Arab governments are uniquely positioned to leverage relationships with all parties to lay out the conditions that could broker a lasting peace. An Arab Peace Initiative II, with multilateral oversight, would have to offer real benefits for all parties. But for any lasting framework to take hold, these important conditions need to be met.

- Palestinian and Jewish national identities should be recognized as legitimate and in need of institutional expression. Individual human rights in both communities need to be protected.
- Antisemitic, Islamophobic, and racist rhetoric and actions must be explicitly and unconditionally repudiated by all actors.
- Any targeting of civilians should not be merely rejected but actively combated by all actors.
- Settlement activities in the Palestinian territories and forced displacement of Palestinians to Egypt, Jordan, or anywhere else should be considered outlawed actions that all actors commit to fight against.
- Full diplomatic, political, and economic relations among participating states should be an outcome of the negotiation process.
- No stateless people should be left behind at the conclusion of any set of agreements.

Introduction

For at least a decade, and perhaps longer, the Palestinian issue has receded on the regional and international agenda—not because it was resolved but because key parties lacked either the interest or the will to agree on how to resolve it. Hamas’s brutal attacks on Israeli civilians and military personnel on [October 7](#)—and the ongoing, harsh Israeli response in Gaza in the past weeks with its [high toll of civilian death](#) and [destruction](#)—show that procrastination can have a high and continuing cost.

Suddenly the issue dominates the attention of many regional and international actors and there is renewed talk of addressing it—talk that so far is not wedded to any concrete initiative or political process. Can the necessity now felt be the mother of invention of a new or revived peace process? Past crises in the Middle East have given birth to new initiatives: could this one produce a more successful outcome?

We do not write in an optimistic vein. Geostrategic realities and political trajectories in the region do not point in the direction of conflict resolution—just the opposite. But those who hear a bleak prognosis often retort: What can be done to reverse trends rather than passively bemoan them? The question is a fair one, especially because pessimism, however justified, has a cost: it will lead powerful regional and international actors to let their attention wander elsewhere again. So, while we are wary to predict a reversal in the pernicious trends on such violent display today, we seek to understand what would constitute such a reversal, what it would require, and to suggest to those who say things must be different what they must do.

And we do not write with a particular end or resolution in mind for the Palestinian issue and for Israel’s security—not one or two or post-sovereign states. We do believe that a stable and

just future must be based on [protection of human rights](#), distance from dehumanization and antisemitism, some institutionalization of Israeli and Palestinian national communities, and economic prosperity for both. But we are agnostic on how to realize those ends and only ask how they might be pursued so that their denial does not explode again.

Who Must Take the Lead? An Unprecedented Arab Answer

In today's Middle East and international politics, Arab countries can play a key role in enabling Israelis and Palestinians to end the current violence, to avoid conditions in Gaza that prolong the lack of security and instability, and to develop a negotiation framework for conflict resolution backed by international and regional support.

The United States has always been a key actor in previous Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts, but it does not have a clear vision as to how to end the Gaza war and provide for new arrangements to safeguard Israel's security and enable the Palestinians to fulfill their long-standing national aspirations. Domestically, the United States is entering a [polarizing election year](#), in which, given ongoing [protests](#) and [activism](#), positions on Israel and Palestine are likely to have some significance, and that will limit the superpower's foreign policy energies. Internationally, the United States is stretched thin between the grand [strategic competition](#) with China, the [Russia-Ukraine war](#), global climate and [advanced technology](#) challenges, and the growth slowdown of the [global economy](#). Indeed, the path the United States chose at the outset—[very close alignment](#) with Israel—seems to have run into severe problems if it was based on the hope of aligning long-term Israeli decisionmaking with U.S. diplomatic goals of reviving a strong Palestinian Authority (PA) and bringing about a two-state solution. [Israeli leaders have instead made clear](#) that they anticipate indefinite Israeli security oversight of Gaza and view the [PA as an adversary](#), and they have worked steadfastly against a two-state outcome. The preferred U.S. option of [PA control](#) of Gaza has [virtually no public support](#) in Israel.

It is thus unlikely that the United States will, as it has before, take the lead today in staging peace efforts for Israel and Palestine. However, U.S. diplomacy, currently [confined to reducing](#) the horrific human cost of the war, could promote and empower regional conflict resolution endeavors.

The same lack of vision can be diagnosed for the European Union, a [very generous donor](#) and previously active participant in the [Middle East Quartet](#), a group established by a multilateral diplomatic burst two decades ago. Since October 7, [member countries of the EU, along with Great Britain](#), have focused their diplomatic actions on joining

the United States in [expressing solidarity](#) with Israel after the Hamas attacks, calling for the [protection](#) of civilians in Gaza, suggesting temporary halts in ongoing military operations, and advancing plans for getting humanitarian aid to the strip's inhabitants, implicitly [operating within the framework](#) imposed by Israeli relocation efforts for Gaza's population. European officials have not made a single policy proposal to end the war or initiate peace. And we should not expect more from them, given the [major differences](#) among EU member states in their positions on the Israel-Palestine issue, their costly [involvement](#) in the Russia-Ukraine war, and rising [antisemitic and anti-Muslim](#) sentiments tearing their social fabrics. However, like the United States, European leaders could support regional initiatives effectively—not least with economic and financial aid packages that will be badly needed in Gaza's future reconstruction.

Key Arab countries, on the other hand, have been invested recently in developing regional security arrangements. Because of long-term trends, these states have both a stronger interest in and capability to take the lead on regional diplomacy—if they can agree on an approach.

First, two vital neighbors of Israel and Palestine, Egypt and Jordan, are potentially powerful investors in such an approach. Geostrategically and politically, for the Egyptian and Jordanian governments, the Gaza war poses massive national security threats linked to the dangers of a [Palestinian mass displacement](#), in addition to the troubling specter of long-term violence in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

Second, Saudi Arabia is a potential participant. Unlike Egypt and Jordan, Saudi Arabia does not have diplomatic relations with Israel and is not a direct neighbor of the Palestinians. However, Saudi diplomacy, in an effort to get the kingdom out of a proxy war in Yemen and regional escalation at large, has reoriented its course to conflict resolution and stabilization steps in the Middle East. Saudi leaders endorsed a Chinese mediation initiative to [restore diplomatic relations](#) with Iran and, prior to the Gaza war, engaged officials of U.S. President Joe Biden's administration in talks tailored toward [normalizing relations](#) between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Long-term violence and ongoing confrontations between Israel and the Palestinians, along with their wider ramifications in the Middle East, pose fundamental threats to Saudi Arabia's interest in regional security and stability.

A final set of participants include not only the Arab countries that signed the [Abraham Accords](#) with Israel and normalized relations—the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco—but also [Qatar](#), which has maintained collaborative relations with Israel as well as with all Palestinian actors, including the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. The web of diplomatic relations and collaboration schemes these countries have developed with Israel and Palestine in recent years can be instrumental in facilitating regional peace efforts.

If they have the interest and the ability, why have they not acted already? To be fair, before October 7, the situation seemed neither favorable to diplomacy nor particularly pressing—until it exploded so spectacularly.

Disputants and Regional Actors

There are two ways our analysis differs from many of those now being produced. First, we are suggesting that a diplomatic effort to address issues dividing Israelis and Palestinians be launched in an unprecedented manner: by a multilateral Arab approach, one that leads rather than reacts. But second, we are starting not with what the actors should want but what they have said they want.

Acknowledging those priorities and preferences makes it clear why the approach is so daunting, but the alternative is to begin unrealistically: with an Israeli leadership committed to a two-state solution; a Palestinian side with an effective and popular leadership; Arab states that will willingly administer and patrol Gaza until the final status negotiations produce the Palestinian state; a United States that will pressure Israel during an election year; or a set of European actors that will step in when the United States falter.

Instead, in reality, the United States and Europe are too preoccupied with the short-term management of the situation unfolding since October 7, 2023, hoping to strike a difficult balance between standing with Israel and containing the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza. Clear policy prescriptions on how to get Israeli and Palestinian officials back to a negotiating table and to conflict resolution measures are not emerging out of Washington, DC, nor out of Brussels, Paris, Berlin, and London. We, therefore, believe that the local environment in Israel and Palestine and the regional environment in the Middle East are both ready for a multilateral Arab approach that can shape the postwar transitional phase and the long-term efforts to solve the conflict.

What do the local and regional parties actually want? And what have they said?

Israel

Israel's current position is clear: its security has been challenged in a fundamental and shocking way and must be restored. But it is doing so at a time when its society and key leaders are deeply divided; public opinion may be volatile and evolve in ways difficult to anticipate. This may be a time to engage Israeli society and offer a regional security regime that has never been on offer in the past. Failure to do so may bring out unilateralism and augment the trends in Israeli politics that have made diplomacy so fruitless.

Indeed, the short-term Israeli response as enunciated by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, despite his dwindling public support, points precisely in the latter direction. He startled many when he stated in early November that his country will oversee [overall security in Gaza after the war](#). [His position](#) is at odds with the hopes of U.S. leaders, among others, that postwar governance in Gaza would [include the Palestinians](#). While there is ostensible agreement that [Hamas should be ousted](#) and that the

Israeli occupation should not return, the current Israeli position seems to suggest the possibility of an indefinite military role for Israel in Gaza and a refusal to accept many of the ideas for [viable Palestinian administration](#) and governance. With its [ongoing](#) military campaign in the strip despite the horrific [death toll](#) of civilians, [mass destruction](#) of civilian facilities including hospitals, and growing [regional](#) and [international concerns](#), [Netanyahu's statement is the clearest indication of the postwar plans of the Israeli government. It is also the logical sequence of the Israeli declared objective](#) of destroying Hamas's military and governance capabilities, despite [doubts](#) about the feasibility of uprooting a movement that has controlled Gaza since 2007. Other political figures in Israel from the right and the left have suggested solutions that all other actors reject, such as [the forced transfer of the population of Gaza to Egypt](#).

Are there more flexible voices? Yes, but they are weak, uncertain, and vague. Opposition leader Yair Lapid, for instance, has warned against Israel's full-fledged control of the strip and suggested that the Palestinian Authority should be in charge [but under an Israeli security presence](#).

It is not clear how the turmoil in Israel will affect its leaders' future positions. For now, the current statements from the Israeli government and opposition as well as the general sentiment among Israelis, who were collectively psychologically shocked by the Hamas attacks on October 7, show that the "political" and the "peaceful" have an uncertain place that will hinder the articulation, initiation, and popular acceptance of conflict resolution measures within Israeli politics and society.

To expect Israel to be proactive in any way other than harsh unilateral measures is unrealistic at present. To nudge Israel toward accepting a holistic, political, and peaceful solution for the Palestinian issue would require a fairly bold set of initiatives that are both practical but also couched in terms that clearly address the fear that the October 7 attacks raised among average Israelis.

The Palestinians

The Palestinians are internally divided—and the fact of the division is as significant as the other issues under contention. Any diplomatic effort will confront the problem that there is currently no leadership that can speak authoritatively for the Palestinians; some kind of viable national leadership must be allowed to revive. The alternative will be to have Israel continue to rule disparate and embittered Palestinian communities and deeply entrench a one-state reality that flares up periodically, engendering global crises.

For all their divisions, Palestinian positions have some clear trends: Palestinians are a national community and must be dealt with as such. That has led the Palestinian Authority (PA) to the steadfast insistence that any PA return to Gaza must be accompanied by a [clear political framework](#) that includes the revival of peace talks and a revival of the two-state solution; to play any other role would be to indefinitely subordinate Palestinian institutions to Israeli security needs. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and his aides have communicated this position both privately and publicly to [the U.S.](#)

[presidential administration, the Egyptian government, and Jordanian officials](#). And it is not just a matter of preference: it is highly unlikely that the PA, in its current decaying and [delegitimized](#) state, even has the institutional resources and political capital needed to re-govern Gaza after nearly twenty years of single-handed Hamas control.

Much of the focus on Hamas concerns its ends—and the movement has learned how to be cagey, hinting at all kinds of possibilities while still insisting that it will [never accept Israel](#). But the focus on the movement’s goals may miss the point about Hamas, which presents itself to Palestinians less in terms of its ends and more in terms of its means: “resistance” is quite literally the movement’s middle name. And [internal debates](#) focus on what resistance means at any particular moment.

So, Hamas’s end game is unclear. After launching the October 7 attacks, the movement and its allies have so far fought Israeli forces militarily and engaged in limited diplomatic efforts for [hostage exchange](#). Hamas and other armed factions have endured [heavy losses in personnel](#), infrastructure, and arms in recent weeks. Hamas’s political leadership abroad seems to be wary of the impacts of the current war on its viability and survival in Gaza—anonymous sources from within Hamas whispered that the decision to attack Israel on October 7 was taken primarily by the [military commanders in Gaza](#) and that the Hamas political leadership abroad learned about details ex post facto. With no invitation to negotiate in day-after scenarios, Hamas—even if it survives the war with reduced military and governance capabilities—will face an isolating regional and international environment that has recentered the PA. It is possible that Hamas will become an underground movement with limited popularity among Palestinians or accept a total disarmament to join the Palestine Liberation Organization as a political force; it is also possible that the movement will simply disintegrate after the heavy losses in the war.

Egypt

Egypt has had peaceful—if often cold—relations with Israel for over four decades. [Many parts of Egyptian society share strong sympathy with Palestinians](#), and the leadership has some hard-nosed concerns as well—ones that focus on matters of security and sovereignty. And while political tensions on domestic issues (especially [economic ones](#)) are notable, the country’s leaders match up very much with popular sentiments on Gaza.

And Egypt is one of the few actors with ties to all sides. When violence has flared up between Israel and Palestinian movements in Gaza, Egypt has assumed the role of a mediator. Egypt [hosted](#) a regional peace summit two weeks after the initial Hamas attack, although the summit did not result in any political solutions to the war. And within Palestinian politics, Egypt has open communication with all Palestinian movements and factions, hence its readiness to sponsor talks among them with the objective of developing a shared Palestinian position regarding postwar steps.

All this may put the country in a strong position to act diplomatically. But what would Egypt be seeking to achieve from any such effort?

Egypt has always considered Gaza a national security priority given the shared border and [spillover terrorism](#) from Gaza to the Sinai Peninsula. The Egyptian leadership has been clear about its rejection of the [mass displacement](#) of Gazans to Sinai, while also [rejecting a proposal for the country](#) to manage security in Gaza in the day-after scenario.

The Egyptian leadership, while continuing its close [coordination with the Palestinian Authority](#), has [expressed reservations in discussions with Israeli and international interlocutors](#) about the tendency to decide the fate of Gaza and Palestine without including Hamas and other armed factions. In hosting Ismail Haniyeh (the Palestinian prime minister and a senior political leader of Hamas), as well as other figures of the Hamas political leadership, for talks in [Cairo on November 10, 2023](#), some elements of Egypt's strategic preferences have emerged. These include a preference for a postwar administration led by the Palestinian Authority, with some possible participation of Hamas and other factions after their theoretical inclusion in the Palestine Liberation Organization. To this end, the Egyptian leadership has hinted at the (re-)initiation of Palestinian reconciliation meetings. Egypt seems to envisage an all-inclusive Palestinian dialogue that should be tasked to develop next-day scenarios, not only for Gaza but for the future of the Palestinian issue. Finally, unlike [other Arab countries](#) that have diplomatic relations with Israel and [ordered their](#) representatives out of Tel Aviv or Israeli diplomats out of their capitals, Egypt has refrained from taking such a step in a display of rational diplomacy and political recognition of the need to avoid sending boycott signals to Israel.

Jordan

Jordan is in a similar position to Egypt but has been far more reactive diplomatically. Like Egypt, it has a [peace treaty with Israel](#) and fears that many steps Israel might take to guarantee its own security might come at Jordan's expense. In some ways, its concerns are even more severe—that Israel will cause refugee flows or treat Jordan as an “alternative homeland” for Palestinians, that recklessness by a Palestinian actor will embroil Jordan, or that domestic tensions among Jordanian citizens will be sparked by violence to its west.

So, like Egypt, Jordan insists on respect for its borders and its sovereignty and rejects population transfer. The government, facing [pro-Gaza](#) and [pro-Hamas](#) mass mobilization in Jordanian cities, has expressed [opposition to the war, accusing Israel of committing war crimes](#). It also spelled out a clear [rejection](#) to an Israeli long-term security presence in Gaza, as well as to [mass displacement ideas](#)—be it displacing Gazans to Egypt or Palestinians from the West Bank and East Jerusalem to Jordan. In multiple public statements, [Prime Minister Bisher al-Khasawneh](#) has rejected all postwar scenarios involving Arab or international administration for Gaza, stating that his country will not position its soldiers in place of the Israeli troops currently waging war on Gaza's civilians and civilian infrastructure. He maintained that [only the Palestinian Authority, in consultation with other Palestinian movements, is responsible for governing the strip](#). Although Jordan withdrew its [ambassador to Israel](#), it has maintained a clear commitment to peaceful conflict resolution measures.

Key Arab States

Other key Arab actors, such as [Saudi Arabia](#) and the [United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE), do not have the same kind of existential concerns that Egypt and Jordan have about the fate of Palestinians. But they have security concerns and diplomatic postures at the regional level that make the current war—and the Palestinian issue in general—one that they are fated to deal with. Saudi Arabia, working to end its costly involvement in a proxy war with Iran in Yemen and to reduce regional tensions at large, has endorsed a [Chinese mediation effort](#) to normalize its relations with Iran. The Saudi leadership has been also engaged in U.S.-mediated [normalization talks with Israel](#) with the objective of establishing diplomatic relations and agreeing on a set of regional security and economic cooperation arrangements. The government of Abu Dhabi, for its part, has led the Gulf in normalization efforts with Israel and gone the furthest regarding [bilateral trade, economic, and cultural cooperation](#) with Tel Aviv. Since the turmoil of the Arab Spring and the spillover effect it had on the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have tailored their diplomacies to promote stability, include Israel in regional security arrangements, and [contain](#) Iran and its proxies. For these objectives, they have signaled their preference for some sort of agreement between Israelis and Palestinians to keep their path to normalization and cooperation, as well as their readiness to mediate between them, wide open. Like Egypt and Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE could sponsor a multilateral Arab initiative to revive peace talks and discuss regional security. An Arab Peace Initiative II is not far-fetched.

Qatar, on the other side, has created various inroads in Middle East diplomacy, maintaining [friendly relations with recent Israeli governments](#) and with the Palestinian Authority. It has also advanced as one of the prime regional [financiers of Hamas](#) and other [militant factions](#) in Gaza—often [in coordination](#) with [Israel](#) and the PA. As a result, Qatar, which [hosts the political leadership of Hamas](#), has been a key player in regional and international containment efforts whenever a new wave of violence between Israel and Hamas has erupted. Qatar and Egypt—both key negotiators in the ongoing talks about [the release of Israeli hostages and Palestinians imprisoned in Israel](#)—could use its resources with both sides to co-sponsor an Arab Peace Initiative II.

Given these long-term concerns, these states have been focused in the current war on calling for an [immediate ceasefire](#) and on easing the humanitarian situation in Gaza. They have also condemned [the killing of civilians](#) on “all sides,” distancing themselves—except for Algeria, Iraq, and Tunisia—from Hamas’s horrific attacks and Israel’s excessive use of military force. Saudi Arabia [hosted an emergency joint summit](#) of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on November 10, in which a call for an international peace conference to solve the Israeli-Palestinian and the Arab-Israeli conflicts—the latter involving the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights and border disputes with Lebanon—was [endorsed by all Arab states](#).

The Perils of Procrastination

The systematic deprioritizing of the Palestinian issue was a gradual process based on a number of regional and global factors. Leading up to the current war in Gaza, the political environment left little room for a political solution. In Israel, right-wing coalition governments, which [dominated Israeli politics in the last decade](#), were not interested in pursuing peace talks with the PA nor in changing—or even moderating—some of Israel’s long-standing expansionary policies such as intensive settlement activities in the [West Bank and East Jerusalem](#), forced displacements of Palestinian families in [both territories](#), and the inhumane [siege imposed on Gaza](#) since Hamas took over control of the strip in 2007.

But it was not only Israel’s disinvestment from two-state diplomacy that drove the Palestinian issue downward in importance. On the Palestinian side, [ongoing disputes](#) between the PA in Ramallah and militant movements led by Hamas’s government in Gaza meant there would be no unified voice if a negotiation table was ever set. Arab-mediated reconciliation efforts between the PA and Hamas—both [Egyptian-](#) and [Qatari-](#)led—bore [no fruit](#).

Israeli policy became based on cementing the division and decay, not overcoming it. Hamas’s radical rhetoric and willingness to engage in [frequent rounds](#) of hostilities with Israel increased the PA’s impotence and irrelevance, both for successive Israeli governments that were preoccupied with security and for the Palestinian public that moved between radicalization and disenchantment. The Ramallah leadership saw its popular acceptance among Palestinians [dwindle](#) and its institutions, which also suffered from [endemic corruption](#) and the [overly dominant role](#) of [security agencies](#), decay and lose [democratic legitimacy](#). Efforts to ensnare Hamas in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) or to [move toward elections](#) were launched periodically but were undermined by almost all actors. Hamas was not merely a victim of exclusion here but an active participant in a so-called resistance axis that limited diplomacy to only short-term halts in fighting. The movement deeply embedded itself in the social fabric of Gaza as a hydra with [three heads](#)—a militarized resistance movement, a local and service-delivering government, and a political leadership—and added a base in exile as well. Thus, containing Hamas—be it through elections, inclusion in the PLO, or incentives such as the gradual easing of the Gaza siege—would have required a vigorous and sustained effort if the goal had been to [tame the movement](#) that increasingly defined itself in opposition to the peace course of the PA.

And indeed, regional factors very much facilitated the pernicious deterioration in Palestinian national institutions. Regionally, although [Egypt and Jordan](#) kept up their diplomatic efforts to revive peace talks between Israel and the PA based on the two-state solution, some Arab states (like [Algeria](#)) confined their roles to fiery [rhetoric](#) and [minor reconciliation talks](#) between Palestinian factions. Others, [such as Syria](#) and [Libya](#), paid little attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict altogether due to internal turmoil. And some countries engaged

in normalization efforts with Israel that [offered no political end to the conflict, such as Bahrain, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates](#).

In the face of this disparate and disengaged approach, [Iran and its nonstate allies](#) in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen found some success in an effort to support what they called the “regional resistance camp.” Ideologically, Iran and the likes of [Hezbollah](#) fashioned a rhetoric that [celebrated](#) Hamas’s occasional firing of rockets on Israel as prime acts of Palestinian liberation. The effect was to prolong the internal Palestinian separation and to maintain instability in Israel’s immediate surroundings.

Internationally, both the United States and European powers, confronted with the turmoil of the decade following the 2011 Arab Spring, focused their Middle East diplomacy on other key regional security concerns. High priorities on the Western tall order in the region were issues such as the [Iranian nuclear program](#); the [war between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their allies](#) in Yemen, which had significant impacts on security in the Gulf; [state disintegration](#) and [security threats in several Arab countries](#); and the impending [migration crisis](#) in the Mediterranean Sea. The United States, which became increasingly preoccupied with its competition with China and more interested in [pivoting toward Asia](#), had no solution-oriented policy on Palestine. It did nothing to pursue the moribund two-state solution. Instead it marched in place, tinkering with its development aid [packages](#) to the PA in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and welcoming regional—Egypt-led—containment and ceasefire efforts in military clashes between Israel and Hamas in [2012](#) and [2014](#). To be sure, there was one [bold American initiative](#)—the stillborn “[deal of the century](#)” offered by former president Donald Trump—but it seemed designed not to devise a better future but to beautify and entrench the present.

Key European countries traditionally engaged in the Middle East, such as France, Germany, Great Britain, and Italy, confined their policies on Palestine to [economic aid](#) packages for the West Bank and humanitarian aid for Gaza. Preoccupied with domestic tensions due to the [rise of right-wing populism](#) and [intra-European fiscal and political conflicts](#), European governments [reduced their engagement in the Middle East](#) to key strategic interests, trade, migration, and security. The global crises resulting from the coronavirus pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine pushed the West further away from any serious policy interest in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The slow death of diplomacy may be understandable given regional and global realities as well as domestic politics among all key actors. But inertia has revealed itself to have a very high price—and not for the first time. Past explosions have been met by sudden bursts of multilateral diplomacy—that have both positive and negative lessons for any present effort.

Lessons From Past Processes Born of Crisis

The war in Gaza has turned regional and international attention once again to the Palestinian issue with a sudden and unexpected force. Although this is not the first violent escalation between Israel and the Palestinians, the horrific nature of both the October 7 attacks and the ongoing Israeli military campaign has engaged the highest level of national leaderships in Middle Eastern capitals and in the West. The tragic [humanitarian crisis in Gaza](#), the [endless bombardment](#) since October 8, the displacement of [over 1 million Palestinians](#) from the north to the south within the strip, and the [unknown fate of Israeli hostages](#) in Hamas's captivity make peace appear distant. However, recent history has shown that heightened attention to Israel and Palestine during phases of intense violence and human suffering could produce unexpected multilateral efforts to push forward conflict resolution measures and peaceful settlements.

There are previous experiences with multilateral efforts to help Israel, the Palestinians, and their Arab neighbors find ways out of the state of permanent conflict, especially after crises. They include [initial talks in 1949](#) at the close of the 1948 war; [the Geneva Conference of 1973](#); [the Madrid Conference of 1991](#); and a collection of more recent efforts, most notably the [Arab Peace Initiative](#) and a UN [road map in 2003](#). None was anything like a success, but neither can they be written off as complete failures. In all cases, the United States played a leading but not exclusive role; other key international actors were generally supportive. The parties themselves spent as much energy on the modalities of the negotiation (and even the legitimacy of negotiation partners) as on the negotiations themselves, limiting progress and making the formal negotiations stiff and full of speechifying rather than substantive talk. Although each effort took place in the aftermath of a war or reduced violence on the ground, the shortcomings of each effort were profound and left unaddressed until the next war or crisis forced them onto the agenda in a forceful and unexpected way. But each negotiation did provide an umbrella for some concrete changes. The initial talks in 1949 [produced four armistice agreements](#), and the 1973 Geneva Conference was stillborn but started a process that ended with bilateral Egyptian-Israeli negotiations and a [peace treaty](#).

The peace talks continued in the years after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, when a regional and international coalition to [liberate Kuwait](#) was formed, led by the United States. The coalition, to which Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria contributed militarily, defeated Iraqi troops, pushed them out of Kuwait, and restored in 1991 the legitimate government of the oil-rich small Gulf state. Because former Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein [used the Palestine issue](#) during the war to attempt to turn the Arab populace against the U.S.-led coalition and [fired a few rockets on Israeli territory](#) to widen the scope of the military confrontation regionally, the U.S. administration of then president George H. W. Bush [promised that U.S. wartime allies](#) would, after the liberation of Kuwait, work to negotiate solutions for the Arab-Israeli conflict (then involving not just Palestinian and Israeli officials but also those from Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon). Egypt was then the only Arab country that signed a [peace treaty with Israel in 1979](#).

After the war, the [United States](#), along with the former Soviet Union as a co-chair, convened a multilateral Middle East peace conference. [The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference](#) was [attended by](#) a Palestinian delegation consisting of local leaders from the West Bank and Gaza, authorized by the PLO but accepted by Israel as part of the Jordanian delegation. The negotiation processes paved the way for long-term peace talks and created the regional and international momentum for the [Oslo I Accord](#) that was signed between Israel and the PLO [and for the Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty](#) signed in October 1994.

Another round of multilateral diplomacy came after one of the many collapses of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations in the early 2000s. In September 2000, the second intifada broke out when then Israeli opposition leader [Ariel Sharon stormed Islamic religious sites](#) in occupied East Jerusalem with heavily armed police units. Sharon's provocation came against the backdrop of [rising popular anger among Palestinians](#) due to the refusal of successive Israeli governments to abide by the Oslo Accords and end the occupation—[per the accords](#), an independent Palestinian state was supposed to be proclaimed in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza by May 4, 1999. Although the early protests of the second intifada were characterized by nonviolence, Israeli forces responded with the use of [excessive and disproportionate](#) force against Palestinian civilians. The vicious cycle of violence and counterviolence was unleashed and lasted for almost five years. Between 2000 and 2007, [nearly 6,000 Palestinians were killed](#) and multiple [terrorist attacks happened](#) in Israel, killing dozens and provoking more [excessive retaliations](#) that included dropping [bombs](#) on Gaza for the first time since the signing of the Oslo Accords.

Amid the second intifada and ongoing Israeli military operations in the occupied Palestinian territories, and in a tense global environment following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on the United States, Arab governments and the PA led by Yasser Arafat gathered in March 2002 for an Arab summit in Beirut. The summit endorsed a Saudi peace plan and adopted it, with the approval of all governments, as the [Arab Peace Initiative \(API\)](#). The initiative offered Israel peace and normalization with all Arabs in return for its withdrawal from all territories occupied on June 5, 1967; its acceptance of the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state; and its finding a just and agreed-upon solution for Palestinian refugees.

This was a bold step put forward collectively by all Arab governments and the PA, while daily hostilities and killings were unfolding in the Palestinian territories and terrorist attacks were dismantling the Israeli sense of security. The API was born in a regional environment in which peace prospects seemed marginal and in an international environment in which the United States was not invested in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and was determined to pivot most of its military and diplomatic resources to [fight global terrorism](#). The API revitalized Middle East diplomacy and brought the United States back into mediation efforts and negotiating tables—the George W. Bush administration announced a [road map for peace](#) later in 2003 and for several months hosted, with [United Nations's endorsement](#), [peace talks](#) between Israelis and Palestinians with the objective of reaching a final settlement. Despite active [U.S.](#) and [international](#) mediation efforts, the peace talks collapsed.

But the ensuing U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 faced the Middle East with new geostrategic risks altogether and diverted the attention of regional and international actors away from the Palestinian issue.

Can the current high-level attention to Palestine and Israel lead to a peace breakthrough? Are regional and international actors ready and willing to seize the moment? Can they help get Israelis and Palestinians out of the current spiral of violence?

These limited experiences contain limited lessons. The Madrid Conference of 1991, the API in 2002, and the road map of 2003 were, in a formal sense, unable to produce anything like a peaceful settlement. But they allowed for tangible opportunities to arise, even if many of those opportunities were squandered. There are many negative lessons to be drawn—the lack of staying power and determination from key international actors; the way diplomatic initiatives can get bogged down in procedural niggling; the inability to address deep power imbalances between Israelis and Palestinians that meant the continuation of the occupation and armed resistance; and the limited willingness of regional actors to renounce all forms of violence against civilians, which legitimized concerns about antisemitism and dehumanization. But the processes do suggest a paradoxical set of lessons: multilateral efforts can be constructed that set broad negotiating frameworks, and although those efforts are not an alternative to bilateral diplomacy among disputants, they can facilitate them and prevent their collapse. And peace efforts also require willing actors—without those, no meetings, multilateral summits, or backroom bilateral deals are possible.

And there is one very significant, if subtle, difference between the current moment and previous ones.

In the past, Arab states have been parties to the conflict. They have been deeply divided and each had their own interests, making diplomacy difficult and often centered around merely getting parties to the table. When they arrived, all attention was on courting them to make concessions and grant recognition; each grudging step in that direction was hard-won. But key Arab actors today are not waiting to be courted: they are deeply interested in a secure regional order, more capable of acting (not merely reacting) diplomatically and engaging with both Israelis and Palestinians rather than waiting for the telephone to ring. Regional stability used to be the coin of American policy speeches, but it is now the goal of key Arab states. To be sure, those states are not used to acting together, and none of them could act alone.

But together, what could they do? How could they build a new initiative?

What Would a Peace Conference 2024 or an API II Look Like?

First, oversight of any Arab initiative should be multilateral. The United States is a necessary but not sufficient participant; it can supply muscle and has ties with Israel that others lack, but it is also seen as completely compromised both by its sharp and reflexive alignment with Israel and for its stubborn insistence that the issues be managed with merely platitudinous references to international law. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council are [deeply divided](#) and unlikely to be positively useful, but the United States, along with its European allies, might be able to act with key Arab states that have working relationships with Israel to sponsor the negotiation process.

Second, the negotiation process would need a participant able to speak authoritatively for the Palestinian people. And this is a profound challenge. For one, there is now no such authority. But it is also true that many of the actors involved have actively undermined the ability of the PA to speak authoritatively—Israel has cut [revenue streams](#), the United States has set up [legal barriers](#), and [many actors have](#) discouraged elections in Palestine. PA leaders themselves have acted high-handedly and allowed [corruption](#), all actors have undermined signed agreements, and Hamas attacks on civilians have undermined peace negotiations. Each of these actors has shown a tendency to blame the others for the sorry state of Palestinian leadership, but all have done their share. To have a viable Palestinian interlocutor, a few steps are needed: (1) an international willingness to deal with PLO leadership and even a declared State of Palestine; (2) delivering that leadership strong legitimating instruments that are tangible and visible, such as a settlement freeze in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and an end to restrictions on internal mobility in the Palestinian territories; (3) giving that leadership tools to revitalize its autonomous institutions, to gradually return to Gaza, and to manage its society's profound internal divisions.

That does not mean inviting Hamas to the negotiating table—such an invitation would likely be declined and drive away other participants. But it may mean something akin to the Madrid Palestinian representation formula, in which a method was found to avoid allowing the problem of who speaks for the Palestinian people to prevent any meeting. It may also mean leaving intra-Palestinian affairs to Arab actors, foremost Egypt and Qatar, that have ties with Hamas and other factions, rather than spinning wheels in devising a formula that can formally and publicly reconcile irreconcilable demands regarding who may represent Palestinians. If this path is taken, it would have to be with acquiescence by key Palestinian actors, an acquiescence that could be engineered in reconciliation meetings hosted by Egypt and Qatar and convened by the PLO with the mandate to articulate a joint Palestinian position on the guiding principles, objectives, and timelines of the negotiation process. This path would also have to secure clear benefits for various parts of the Palestinian people for allowing their leaders to cooperate with diplomacy. Those benefits could range from a settlement freeze and freedom of mobility in the West Bank and East Jerusalem to easing any postwar siege arrangements imposed on Gaza and promoting reconstruction efforts.

Third, any negotiation process would have to offer real benefits to all parties, not only the Palestinians. And this would be difficult because the benefits that could tempt one actor might alienate another. American officials tried to sidestep this problem during the Oslo process of the 1990s by simply emphasizing process rather than outcome. (The United States emphatically rejected any endorsement of a two-state solution for this period.) The idea was that in the course of direct negotiations, the two parties would build trust and find solutions. That happened to a small extent, but not nearly enough—and [spoilers who rejected](#) the Oslo process took powerful steps to torpedo its success. In the 2000s, the United States and some other key actors explicitly endorsed a two-state solution but did so in vague and almost platitudinous terms—and without any serious effort to address developments on the ground, such as the expansion of settlements, the two-state solution was not a credible option. The 2003 road map attempted to fill the gap, but the lack of enforcement or political commitment by key actors (including the United States and Israel) left the detailed framework it offered in forgotten tatters.

A more appropriate starting point for today might therefore be a set of general principles that could be offered to all parties: that Palestinian and Jewish national identities be recognized as legitimate and in need of institutional expression; that individual human rights as well as the rights of national communities need protection; that antisemitic, Islamophobic, and racist rhetoric and actions must be explicitly and unconditionally repudiated by all actors; that any targeting of civilians is not merely rejected but should be actively combated by all parties to the negotiation process; that settlement activities in the Palestinian territories and forced displacement of Palestinians to Egypt, Jordan, or anywhere else are outlawed actions that all parties commit to fight against; that full diplomatic, political, and economic relations among participating states should be an outcome of the process; and that no stateless people should be left behind at the conclusion of any set of agreements.

These principles certainly provide a full guide to a peaceful and stable future—but of course the objection might be heard that the guide is far too full. Certainly, Israel would embrace some but would balk at others; Palestinians might be suspicious less of their content than their generality and viability given Palestine's past experiences with the will of all actors to uphold negotiation and peace principles. The United States would find them extremely ambitious and might be reluctant to endorse them without prior Israeli approval. Indeed, the United States has not shown a sustained interest in pursuing any initiative in the face of Israeli opposition for more than half a century.

However, if an initiative like this were to be put forward, the logical source would not be either the United States nor the direct conflict disputants, Israel and the Palestinians. Rather, it would be born out of the diplomatic engagement of those Arab states with relations with Israel, and its prelude could be a peace conference convened in a major Arab capital. In this sense, the ideas we have outlined are more likely to emerge as a sort of successor to the API and indeed might be more attractive in that guise. Unlike any time in the past, the possible sponsors of an API II—Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—have between them relations and assets with all key actors: Israel, Palestinians of various stripes, and even the United States. Washington seems desperate

for realistic ideas and may, along with its European allies, react to some of the suggestions listed here less allergically if they are coupled with an offer of regional relations among its various partners—four of the countries mentioned above do not have diplomatic relations with Israel. Israeli leaders, therefore, might be enticed into a fuller regional integration and a majority might, gradually and with security assurances, pick this path over the other—a [“Jewish supremacist” state](#) with a [population half](#) Palestinian—on offer to them. Palestinians have few other options.

So, while we endorse this outline, we do not assess its adoption as overly likely. But more importantly, we offer it not only as the sort of initiative that would be required to turn outrage and tragedy into productive diplomacy, but also as a way of testing the honest intention of those advocating any initiative. We believe that Arab states, with their profound interest in regional security after a decade of turmoil, along with their accumulated assets with Israel, the Palestinians, and the West, could shoulder this responsibility and launch an ambitious effort to center and address the Palestinian problem and reverse the [marginalization trajectory](#) of recent years that undermined regional stability and prosperity. Something less ambitious, focused on security and governance arrangements in Gaza and de-escalation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem after the war, might seem more realistic, but it would actually be taken by many Palestinians and Arabs as a return to a familiar script on steadily deteriorating terrain. Regional and international leaders would intone generalities and issue statements as if there is a viable diplomatic process and do so in such a manner that is not simply harmless but actually a smoke-screen for a deepening set of problems that—for current leaders—will at best explode on a successor’s watch.

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