

Without Enforcement, Talk of Two States Is Hollow

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Articles & Testimony

Most Israelis would support a deal if they were sure it would bring them security, but their current skepticism is based on real and urgent concerns about demilitarization given their past experience with Gaza and Lebanon.

The Biden administration hopes to use a hostage release deal to pivot from the Gaza war to a broader historic regional breakthrough between Israel and Saudi Arabia, notching a crucial strategic victory against destabilizing forces in the Mideast. With its public upset by Palestinian civilian casualties during the post-10/7 Israel-Hamas war, the Saudis have now made irreversible movement towards a Palestinian state a prerequisite for such a breakthrough.

In this context, the *Washington Post* reported (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/14/gaza-peace-israel-palestinian-state/>) on Thursday that the US and several Arab states are in rapid-fire discussions to develop a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace plan with a “firm timeline” for the establishment of a Palestinian state. While this is likely a trial balloon—perhaps initiated by Arab officials—and it is far from clear if the White House will sign off on the specific dates or a detailed plan for a Palestinian state, some want a quick demonstration of progress to dampen tensions expected to rise during the month of Ramadan, which starts on March 10. The timeline for an actual agreement is short due to the upcoming American elections: the Biden administration wants to seal a Saudi deal before summer when the presidential campaign is in full swing.

This plan has, unsurprisingly, upset many in Israel, who feel this would effectively reward Hamas for its massacre of Israelis. In both the *Post* article and some other analyses, the Netanyahu government and Hamas are presented as the only real hang-ups to a grand deal that would reconcile Israel and many Arab states while achieving a two-state solution.

Yet Israeli reservations about a Palestinian state go well beyond Netanyahu and are based on real and urgent

concerns, security chief among them. This must be dealt with seriously by linking progress on Palestinian statehood to meeting clear security benchmarks, without which instability is certain. An American effort that does not take this into account risks misreading Israeli politics and the concerns of a majority of Israelis across the political spectrum.

Israeli support for two states, a **[strong majority \(https://dataisrael.idi.org.il/\)](https://dataisrael.idi.org.il/)** in the heady days of the 1990s Oslo process, has eroded for years. The national trauma of the slaughter of 1,200 Israeli innocents—some beheaded, burned alive and raped—on October 7th and the ensuing war further hardened public opinion. In **[January \(https://en.idi.org.il/articles/52742\)](https://en.idi.org.il/articles/52742)**, 59% of Jewish Israelis rejected a two-state solution as part of a package of US guarantees, normalization with Arab states, and long-term military peace. Support for two states is tied to perceptions of its feasibility, and Israelis have grown increasingly skeptical: a **[month before \(https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/26/israelis-have-grown-more-skeptical-of-a-two-state-solution/\)](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/26/israelis-have-grown-more-skeptical-of-a-two-state-solution/)** October 7, only 32% of Israeli Jews thought Israel and a Palestinian state could coexist peacefully, down 14% from 2013.

The core reason for this opposition is more practical than ideological. Many Israelis support the idea of a compromise for peace but are wary of abandoning the status quo without an agreement with a partner they trust—in their view, the only way to provide real security and actually end the conflict. While a dedicated minority view the West Bank as biblical patrimony which cannot be ceded, in January 2023 over **[60% of Israelis \(https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/928\)](https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/928)** were willing to accept mutual Israeli-Palestinian recognition of the other's legitimate claims, an end to the conflict and the end of future claims under a two-state solution. If Israelis thought a deal would work, a majority would support it. They understand that, if successful, a two-state solution is the best way to ensure Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state.

For now, though, most Israelis associate two states with a profound security risk and **[prefer \(https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA725-1.html\)](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA725-1.html)** the status quo, despite its dangers. That concern is well-founded: for the past 30 years, Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian arena has often—albeit not always—led to violence, not peace.

Though Israel withdrew from West Bank cities during the Oslo process, the second Intifada erupted soon after US-led peace talks broke down in 2000. Over 1,000 Israelis were killed, many of them in suicide bombings. Withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 saw Hamas evict the mainstream Palestinian Authority (PA) from there in mere days in 2007 with a small core of heavily armed fighters, then spend 16 years developing rocket factories and a sprawling subterranean fortress unimpeded. This was a crucial point. When the chips were down, nobody stopped Hamas from outmuscling and outmaneuvering the PA. Israel has been living with Hamas control ever since. The year 2007 was not a moment in time. Rather, it changed the very trajectory of Gaza control.

Beyond the Israeli-Palestinian arena, withdrawal from the Israeli security zone in southern Lebanon did not bring peace with Hezbollah. Instead, it let the group consolidate control despite a war with Israel in 2006, ignore UN Resolution 1701 to develop an arsenal of 150,000 rockets and missiles, some precision-guided, and deploy 6,000 Radwan commandos near the border—a second critical turning point from which Israel did not recover. Israel was forced to evacuate 60,000-80,000 civilians from its northern border region shortly after October 7 for fear of a similar attack.

A Fail-Safe Mechanism

The failures of Gaza and Lebanon, underscored by Hamas and Hezbollah's continued unrelenting denial of Israel's right to exist, shattered the premise—key to any peace deal—that withdrawal makes Israel safer. The lesson for Israelis is simple: without durable and substantive enforcement of demilitarization of a future Palestinian state, any political solution to the conflict will be under permanent threat.

To be sure, Palestinians have ample reason to distrust Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly endorsed a two-state solution in 2009, but later renounced it, and several key figures in his cabinet oppose a Palestinian state on ideological grounds. Continued **settlement expansion** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/beyond-blocs-jewish-settlement-east-israels-security-barrier-and-how-avert-slide>) has also damaged perceptions of the feasibility of two states.

While this government likely cannot be swayed, American strategy needs to separate ideological opposition to a Palestinian state from the larger group of Israelis whose resistance stems from security concerns. To convince a majority of Israelis to support a two-state solution and evacuate West Bank settlements, there must be a fail-safe mechanism to ensure a Palestinian state remains demilitarized. Vague principles are insufficient.

Ensuring success for a future Palestinian state requires fixing the asymmetry between strong non-state actors and weak states that drives chronic instability in many Middle Eastern countries. Too often, those who fire the shots call them. The first step, which Israel is already doing, is to remove Hamas's military capabilities and weaken it enough to be contained by Palestinian security forces.

Then, a future Palestinian state must provide dignity and sovereignty for the Palestinians and be strong enough to deal with extremist actors like Hamas, without militarizing and posing a security threat to Israel. This is a delicate balance without international parallels: none of the 15 demilitarized states worldwide are in conflict zones. But it is not impossible.

Past proposals for demilitarization outlined a Palestinian state without an air force, armor, or heavy weaponry, but with strong internal security, police, and counterterrorism forces to maintain internal order. Israeli-Palestinian intelligence and occasional operational cooperation would continue. The key ingredient is a third party capable of simultaneously guaranteeing demilitarization and survival of the fledgling Palestinian state. This third party would oversee border security to prevent arms smuggling, verify demilitarization by checking for weapons factories and more, and deconflict between Israeli and Palestinian forces. After all, the US wants a Palestinian state to look like Costa Rica, but with good reason rooted in experience, Israel fears that a non-careful withdrawal could produce a Palestinian state that looks more like a dangerous mini-Iran.

The six Arab states that have peace with Israel could theoretically serve this function, but there is no evidence that they want to be seen as using force against fellow Arabs. And if most Arab states will not even condemn the October 7 atrocities, what would those guarantees be worth?

Without a very serious 'coalition of the willing' of significant states prepared to confront bad actors, the US or NATO seem to be the only options. The US maintains a military presence in **dozens of countries** (<https://installations.militaryonesource.mil/view-all>) like Germany and South Korea on their request without eroding their sovereignty.

The idea of deploying American troops or NATO will be unattractive to Americans and Israelis alike. Americans want to avoid dangerous foreign entanglements and Israelis have no desire to complicate US-Israel relations: they are proud that Israel defends itself by itself, and do not want American lives at risk. Israel could serve as the initial guarantor and eventually turn over authority, since it will want the ability to intervene if the PA proves unable to contain Hamas. This would likely be interpreted as an extension of the military occupation, however, and could be politically unacceptable. Hence, the need for a transition.

These critical details should not obscure the main point. Recent history indicates any discussion of a two-state solution without an accompanying enforcement mechanism is a recipe for failure. The US needs to push for a Palestinian state that actually works: otherwise Hamas and other violent extremists will overtake it and October 7 will repeat itself.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations. This article was originally published [on the Times of Israel website \(https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/without-enforcement-talk-of-two-states-is-hollow/\)](https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/without-enforcement-talk-of-two-states-is-hollow/). ❖

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