

From War to Peace in the Middle East? Observations from a Regional Tour

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Brief Analysis

The Washington Institute's executive director reflects on the feasibility of the Biden administration's current diplomatic plans in the region, based in part on what local officials said during his recent group trip to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and the PA.

On February 22, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with members of a delegation sent to the Middle East to assess the prospects for security and peace in the current environment. The following is an edited transcript of remarks delivered by Robert Satloff, the Institute's Segal Executive Director and Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy.

[Read remarks by other speakers or watch video of the event.](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/war-peace-trip-report-middle-east-study-tour>

I have traveled to the Levant—Israel and its neighbors—many times over the past forty years, even during moments of conflict such as the Lebanon war and the first and second intifadas. This trip was different. The dark clouds that accompanied us were not just the rain that fell from Riyadh to Amman to Tel Aviv. There was a sadness, a sobriety, a harshness that we felt in every city—especially in Israel but not solely there.

We spent a half-day at Kfar Aza, one of the communities that suffered the most from the October 7 attack, walking around with a survivor telling his family story of being locked in a safe room for twenty-one hours with two little children as Hamas terrorists were going house to house, machine-gunning kids in their beds and leaving hand grenades in refrigerators so that survivors and first-responders would themselves get blown up even after the last attacker was killed or captured. Just over the empty field that Hamas invaders traversed in a blink of an eye to mount their attack, one can also see and hear the bombs going off in Beit Hanoun and Jabalia. It was the war—past and

present—in one frame.

In relative terms, the 30,000 or so killed in the war is a small number compared to the staggering fatality counts of Assad's brutality, the generation of war in Afghanistan, or the genocides in Darfur, Rwanda, and Cambodia, but relative tragedy does not tell the story. The shock and horror of this war is real, powerful, and all-encompassing—one cannot but be moved by the enormity and depth of the human tragedy, among Israelis and Palestinians alike.

In private, Arab states are rooting for Israel to destroy Hamas—one senior Arab official even said, "Israel is fighting for us in Gaza, and if it wins, it will succeed in defeating an Iranian proxy for the first time in forty years." But Arab states are focused on their own security and their own interests and are either unwilling or unable to play much of a role in shaping the outcome in Gaza or helping fill the vacuum that will be left by the Hamas defeat they all privately say they want.

By and large, Arab states would like to roll the clock back to October 6, except on one point: they all face domestic political urgency because of mass sympathy for the Palestinians and Al Jazeera-fueled outrage against the Israelis, which has caused them to channel energy into producing some tangible progress on the goal of Palestinian statehood, energy that wasn't there on October 7. It's not readily apparent that this emerges from the people of Gaza, who surely have other things on their mind; it is a requirement of postwar diplomacy that is only connected to the war by the upsurge in popular affinity for the plight of the Palestinians.

The fact is that there was, as of October 6, progress on the Saudi-Israeli-U.S. "Big Bang" trilateral deal that the Saudis would like to get over the finish line. However, the Saudis don't seem to want to do much to get it there. In their view, it's up to America to convince Israel that it is reasonable that the price Israelis should be willing to pay Saudi Arabia is higher today, given the beating Israel's reputation has taken since October 7. In hearing this, one senses almost zero appreciation that Israel today is a very different country than it was on October 6 and that, for the vast majority of Israelis, even talking about the two-state solution is viewed as bizarre, even perverse.

One odd aspect of the trip is that I understand Saudi motivations for a mutual defense treaty with the United States less today than before I was in Riyadh. That's because so many Saudis tout the benefits they received from the detente they worked out with Iran nearly a year ago, a detente they say has spared the kingdom from Iranian mischief that has spread everywhere. If, as many suggest, at least one rationale for the October 7 attack was to upset the prospect of Saudi-Israel normalization, logic would dictate that the Iranians have other things up their sleeve to spoil a renewed push toward that normalization now. So while I applaud the Saudis for saying they want a closer, more intimate relationship with the United States, I remain confounded by their eagerness for the unknown of a U.S. defense treaty that will only have the U.S. promise to consult in times of emergency, in the process jettisoning the relative quiet they have enjoyed the past year. Despite this apparent disconnect, the fact remains that the Saudis seem to want the U.S. treaty very much.

Similarly, Israel wants the normalization very much too—there are different reasons for different people, but fundamentally they want it because it is the way out of the isolation Israel currently faces and because it gives Israel a broad strategic regional alliance in its confrontation with Iran. Are the Israelis willing to pay the price? Do we even know the real price? Are the Saudis and Israelis even talking directly about this, or is the entire conversation happening via the Americans? Unclear on all fronts.

Talking about these issues with most Israelis is an experience in cognitive dissonance: they see the world solely through the lens of 10/7. The humanitarian impact of the war is not on the popular radar and is generally viewed as a secondary aspect of the war-fighting against Hamas. To their credit, with only one exception, we did not hear Israeli officials talk in ideologically maximalist terms about their war aims—by and large, they were very precise: dismantle Hamas military capacity and governing capability so Hamas cannot again mount a military threat to Israel or stand

in the way of alternative governance in Gaza. But operationally, there was not a single Israeli we met who questioned the wisdom of the Rafah operation, merely the timing and the plan to move civilians—about which they are confident, though real details of the plan to provide safe, secure, livable zones for Rafah’s more than one million civilians are decidedly scanty.

In private conversation, Arab officials—especially, but not solely, military and intelligence officials—express great sympathy and understanding for Israel’s situation. Arabs are still working closely with Israel to stem Iranian smuggling and to cooperate against radical plans to escalate on other fronts. But the political coordination on the future of Gaza is still very weak—with one or two narrow exceptions, it is almost nonexistent. Arabs want America to carry the water here, too. They aren’t even willing to do the hard work on something like Palestinian reform, which everyone says is essential but few are willing to make happen.

It bears remembering that the most significant reform of the Palestinian Authority was forced upon then-PA leader Yasser Arafat in 2002 by a Republican president, George W. Bush, who imposed a prime minister and finance minister on Arafat and, in return, gave a performance-based roadmap. This is a far cry from the loose talk about a time-bound, irreversible step toward a Palestinian state we hear in some quarters, in return for which the current PA leader is likely to do little more than exchange one crony prime minister for another. And this occurs amid even more objectionable talk about throwing Hamas a lifeline by bringing it under the PLO umbrella under the banner of Palestinian unity—in the current environment, as terrible an idea as one could imagine.

If Washington, Cairo, Riyadh, Amman, or other capitals expect Israelis to emerge from their post-October 7 fog anytime soon, I think they will be sorely disappointed. In the best of circumstances, Hamas and Israel will soon reach an agreement for an extended pause in fighting—what is now being termed a “temporary ceasefire”—in which many of the remaining hostages will be released. (This is not a done deal, but they are close to the zone of agreement; even so, my hunch is that not all hostages will be released, because I am skeptical that Yahya al-Sinwar and his comrades will fill the terms of this deal any more than they filled the terms of the last deal.) Many hostages, especially the women, will come out with horror stories that will almost surely further enrage Israelis and propel them to wait out the end of the pause to resume fighting, especially if the only hostages that remain are soldiers, not civilians.

All those other capitals have something else in mind—not only to use the pause as an off-ramp from the war altogether, but in that time to pull opportunity out of crisis. Specifically, they hope to extract concessions from Israel on a practical, if extended, vision of Palestinian self-determination in a recognized state—just enough to allow for Saudi-Israel normalization, a U.S.-Saudi mutual defense treaty (even including a civil nuclear cooperation accord), and perhaps even an Israel-Lebanon/Israel-Hezbollah understanding that brings those parties back from the brink of war. And all that—including Senate ratification of America’s first mutual defense treaty with a foreign country in decades—is supposed to happen in a matter of weeks, perhaps a few months. In other words, Joe Biden will soon decide whether he, like every president since Jimmy Carter, will risk his presidency on the pursuit of Middle East peace, but in this case he has in mind a miraculous bank shot that, by summer, could end the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli conflict once and for all. God bless him—I think he has performed terrifically since October 7—but put me down as a skeptic.

I give the Biden administration enormous credit for taking swift and decisive measures over the past four months to deter regional escalation. But let’s not kid ourselves, a certain escalation happened, just not the general regional war many feared. Israelis say they are now facing seven hot fronts of military operation—Gaza, West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Iran. They are involved directly in six, leaving America, Britain, and some allies to address the Houthis and their rockets, missiles, and threats to Red Sea shipping. Even with Iran husbanding its resources and avoiding a direct confrontation, it has activated all those fronts, watching safely from the confines of its own territory as its adversaries take on one proxy after another. We may be scoring tactical victories, but it’s not even

clear we are playing the right game. And I haven't even mentioned Iran's nuclear program, a topic that barely came up in our travels—which is probably just the way Iran wants it.

To end on a hopeful note: I do think the Israelis are coming to the end of main battle operations: Rafah may be a question mark, but after Rafah, there are no more Rafahs. Hopefully, we can soon turn to the question of what fills the vacuum in Gaza. Contractors around the region—and we met with some—are eager to rebuild. Some Arab countries have signaled a willingness to do things on the ground in Gaza, in certain instances, far more ambitious than ever contemplated before; the Emiratis are usually mentioned in this regard as well as others.

The Israelis are slow on this front, both because they are focused on the military issues and because of the politics involved. And here I don't just mean the far right's messianic aspirations to resettle Gush Katif, but also the more general Israeli political sense that it is wrong to make north Gaza safe enough for Palestinians to return until the Israeli evacuees are safe enough to return to their burnt and ransacked homes in southern Israel.

But the Israelis are beginning, with baby steps. As the *Times of Israel* reports, they just launched a pilot project that has local Gazans unaffiliated with Hamas or the PA running a neighborhood in Gaza City. I have my doubts that this approach is replicable on a broad scale, since international aid agencies and key Arab states and other countries that are necessary for reconstruction will want a PA connection. But at least it shows a start. This is essential because real victory will not be achieved by just dismantling Hamas, but by replacing it with something much, much better. And on that task, there is a lot of work to do. 💎

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