

How Trump, Arab Leaders, and Israel Can Close the Gaps on Gaza

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Brief Analysis

Despite its risks for regional stability and U.S. policy, the president's Gaza proposal has put this issue at the top of the priority list.

President Trump's bombshell proposal for the United States to build a "Gaza Riviera" is now a trending hashtag on social media. In a series of statements this week, he called for Palestinians to leave Gaza indefinitely while it is rebuilt, asking Egypt and Jordan to shelter them in the meantime. He also did not insist on a two-state outcome for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, breaking with a policy sustained by successive Republican and Democratic administrations, including his first term. He even noted his willingness to send U.S. forces into the Strip and "take ownership" of its reconstruction. His team then spent the following day walking back the prospect of new American military commitments and denying that any U.S. funding would be used for reconstruction, though the president retained his position on U.S. "ownership."

The specifics of these proposals are unclear. Established international law on human rights and migration clearly states that it is illegal to force people to relocate other than in cases of military necessity. The White House has already clarified that Trump is not asking Gazans to leave against their will, and military necessity does not apply in this case. Some Gazans would no doubt leave voluntarily if given the chance to resettle elsewhere. Yet much would depend on which countries are willing to take them in and how the parties formalize the "temporary" nature of their relocation, since hosts and evacuees alike would otherwise be skeptical of U.S. assurances that they will be permitted to return. Moreover, even if many Gazans are convinced to leave willingly, others would surely refuse,

creating major legal and practical dilemmas for any actors attempting to carry out the “Riviera” plan.

Trump’s Rationale—and What He Expects from Arab Leaders

After U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff reported back from his Gaza visit last week, Trump apparently concluded that rebuilding the heavily damaged, geographically condensed territory will be impossible if the population remains in place and the borders remain closed. His announcement moved the goalposts on Gaza negotiations, very much in line with Trump’s established playbook of upping the ante, creating a pressurized situation, and putting the onus on others to offer workable solutions. In his view, “workable solutions” do not require full-scale policy changes—for example, when Colombia, Mexico, and Canada responded to his recent pressure with modest adjustments to resource investments and cooperative language, the president eased off.

By publicly announcing his Gaza proposal, Trump seemingly prodded Arab states to explain why they believe his solution is unworkable. Yet given his history with Israeli-Palestinian affairs during his first administration—including the region’s sharp reaction to his January 2020 “deal of the century” proposal for a two-state outcome that would have entailed major Israeli annexations in the West Bank—it is difficult to believe he did not anticipate the inevitable pushback against his Gaza plan. The Arab League rejected the idea of emptying Gaza both before and after Trump’s meeting with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, while Saudi Arabia released an official statement reaffirming that normalization with Israel is still tied to future Palestinian statehood.

Simply throwing cold water on Trump’s proposal will not be enough, however—he wants Arab leaders to advance credible alternatives that address his concern about attempting reconstruction without safely relocating some or all of Gaza’s two million residents. Offering to host new donor conferences will not suffice either, unless they are paired with serious, practical steps to deal with the urgent situation on the ground.

A Double-Edged Sword for Israel?

With the focus now on Arab leaders, Trump slashed away much of the pressure Netanyahu was facing on Gaza. Like most swords, however, this one is double-edged: the president’s Gaza announcement quickly emboldened Israel’s right-wing camp and settler movement to call for immediate annexation of the West Bank. When asked about that prospect, Trump tempered expectations and gave Netanyahu an excuse for holding off, stating, “People do like the idea, but we haven’t taken a position on it yet. We’ll be making an announcement probably on that very specific topic over the next four weeks.”

In the end, the president is unlikely to support annexation because it will cost him what he wants most: Saudi normalization with Israel. In 2020, the United Arab Emirates offered to normalize ties and secured a five-year Israeli commitment not to annex the West Bank. In response, the president backed off from the “deal of the century” and got the Abraham Accords. The Saudis will expect more than just an Israeli commitment not to annex, including credible movement toward Palestinian statehood.

In addition, Trump’s proposal risks collapsing the Gaza ceasefire and impeding the release of the remaining hostages. Unsurprisingly, Hamas rejected the proposal right away, in part because the group knows it would be exposed without its human shields in Gaza. Hamas leaders might also question whether they should continue implementing the ceasefire if its subsequent phases and ultimate outcome are now in flux. This issue could become another double-edged sword for Netanyahu—if Hamas breaks the ceasefire, he would have an opening to resume the war and preserve his governing coalition, but that would also mean dooming the remaining hostages, which would drive Israeli public opinion against him.

Crucial Meetings with Jordan and Egypt

Trump's announcement also raises the stakes for his imminent White House summits with King Abdullah II of Jordan (February 11) and, potentially, President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt (rumored to be in the works for the following week). As acknowledged during his first administration, Trump has numerous interests in maintaining productive relationships with both countries: Egypt and Jordan's peace treaties with Israel are critical to regional stability, border security, and Israeli defense planning; Jordan hosts U.S. forces, while Egypt enables crucial military overflights; and each government regularly shares important intelligence with Washington. Both countries are also economically fragile, in part because they are still hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees from conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and elsewhere. As such, they view the prospect of taking in large numbers of Palestinians as an existential challenge to their social stability and a potentially fatal blow to their legitimacy as defenders of Palestinian rights.

King Abdullah's visit in particular may be the most important meeting of his reign. All U.S. assistance to Amman—around \$2 billion in direct budget support, military aid, economic aid, and refugee support—is **currently paused** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trumps-foreign-assistance-review-prioritizes-funding-over-policy>) as part of the Trump administration's ninety-day aid freeze, and the Jordanian government's anti-Israel language during the Gaza war has been deeply unwelcome in Washington.

As for Sisi, the bulk of his country's funding has been spared by a waiver that protects the \$1.3 billion per year in U.S. military assistance to Egypt. It is unclear if Trump is willing to maintain that funding without securing enhanced commitments from Cairo.

Indeed, Sisi and Abdullah would both be wise to arrive at the White House bearing realistic, implementable proposals on Gaza. That could be enough to secure Trump's support for robust foreign assistance and a commitment to strengthening the partnerships.

How to Improve the Chances of Success

Despite putting the onus on Arab leaders to articulate their alternative plans for Gaza, President Trump should still offer more specifics about what he envisions and empower his administration accordingly. For example, his executive orders on pausing foreign assistance, cutting budgets, and dismantling certain agencies may soon strip his government of practical functions that are indispensable to any reconstruction effort, including **mine clearance** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/explosive-remnants-gazas-literal-ticking-bomb>), rubble removal, restoration of water and sanitation services, and security force training. Current estimates indicate that rebuilding Gaza may take as much as \$80 billion over fifteen years, so Arab leaders will surely wonder whether Washington intends to provide any of that funding, or at least the expert help and oversight needed to shape the rehabilitation and reconstruction effort effectively.

The silver lining of Trump's proposal is that Gaza's dire conditions and postwar fate are now a front-page, front-burner issue. This is important because months of international inaction on this front have enabled the remnants of Hamas to **hijack humanitarian aid distribution** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/countering-hamass-shadow-governance-gaza>) and compete with criminal networks for local control. Reversing these trends will require a very specific plan of action on the ground.

The door is now open for Arab leaders to move from a flat "no" on Trump's Gaza proposal to "yes, but." They should be clear on both the steps they will take and what they will require of the administration in order to take those steps. This means presenting Trump with political moves and practical measures on the ground that would make reconstruction and a "day after" approach to Gaza possible. These could include:

- Condemning Hamas for the October 7 attack and confirming that the group will have no governance role in Gaza
- Assuming responsibility for securing real reform within the Palestinian Authority (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pa-reform-key-west-bank-stability-and-possible-rule-gaza>) so that it can become a viable governing alternative (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reforming-palestinian-authority-roadmap-change>) for Gaza
- Stopping their genocide allegations (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-and-icj-comparing-international-court-cases-during-gaza-war>) and public incitement against Israel within UN institutions
- Presenting collective, practical proposals on what the “Arab Quint” (Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) can do to establish stabilization forces in Gaza, restore health services and commercial activity, and provide administrative oversight during reconstruction.

Such moves would put the onus back on Israel to get to its own “yes” on certain Palestinian issues. If Trump wants to achieve his top priority in the region—Saudi normalization with Israel—this will be the necessary starting point.

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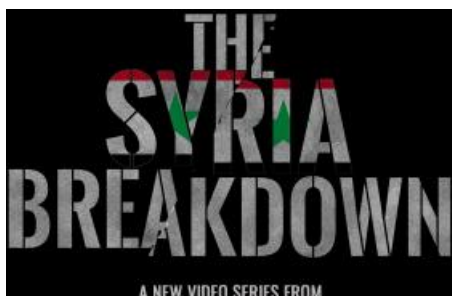
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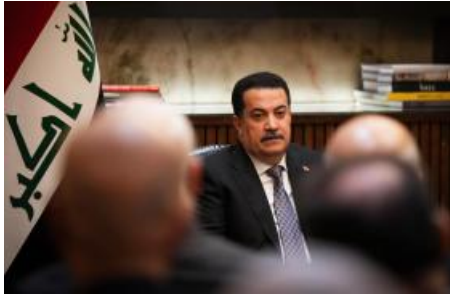
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