

# Two Arab Summits Hold the Key to a Viable Gaza Plan

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**Under heavy pressure from the Trump administration, the Arab states with the most to gain—and lose—in Gaza should be spending the next two weeks doing everything they can to reach consensus on bold, concrete counter-proposals.**

**O**n February 20, senior officials from five Arab states will meet in Riyadh to discuss President Trump's "Gaza Riviera" proposal, followed by an emergency Arab League summit in Egypt on March 4. In the lead-up to these meetings, Arab leaders have uniformly rejected Trump's idea of relocating two million Gazans to Jordan and Egypt. At minimum, the summits will give them a forum to jointly restate this opposition and reaffirm their support for Palestinian statehood. Ideally, however, officials will use the meetings to coordinate an Arab postwar strategy that supplements the traditional "two-state" mantra with concrete plans for providing security, governance, and reconstruction in Gaza, sidelining Hamas in the process.

## Peace Partners Under Pressure

**J**ust days after Trump floated his Gaza idea, Jordan's King Abdullah II visited the Oval Office on February 11 for a high-stakes meeting with the president. Before these talks, Trump suggested he might condition nearly \$2 billion in annual U.S. assistance on the kingdom agreeing to accept refugees from Gaza.

Despite this tense prelude, the meeting reportedly went well—Trump rolled back his threat to cut critical funding, while Abdullah offered to provide medical treatment to 2,000 Palestinian children inside Jordan. When reporters

subsequently asked the king whether he would accede to Trump's Riviera idea, he deferred a definitive answer, stating that Egypt had a plan and that he would confer with partners in Riyadh on February 20 before getting back to the president. After dodging a bullet in Washington, Abdullah sought to shore up support at home, quickly tweeting that he had conveyed to Trump "Jordan's steadfast position against the displacement of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank." He added, "This is the unified Arab position." In contrast, Egypt's President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi decided not to brave these potentially treacherous diplomatic waters, canceling his own tentatively planned visit to Washington.

## Arab Coordination So Far

On February 1, the foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, along with a representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization, delivered a letter (<https://www.axios.com/2025/02/03/gaza-palestinians-reconstruction-rubio-egypt-letter>) to Secretary of State Marco Rubio rejecting the administration's Gaza proposal. "Deportation of Palestinians from their land [will] push the region towards more tension, conflict and instability," they warned. The missive repeated the perennial demand for a two-state solution but offered no alternatives to Trump's ideas, nor any tangible Arab role in addressing the immediate challenges posed in Gaza.

Subsequently, National Security Advisor Mike Waltz suggested that Trump's proposal was not a definitive U.S. commitment, but rather a starting point for discussion on Gaza's future disposition. "The president is engaging with our key allies in the region and asking for their input," he told CBS News on February 5, noting that Trump's approach would spur "the entire region to come with their own solutions."

Tomorrow, officials from Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE will convene for a mini-summit in Riyadh; Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas may attend as well. The meeting will give them a chance to fine-tune Egypt's purported Gaza plan before rolling it out at the Cairo summit on March 4 and eventually presenting it to the Trump administration.

The Egyptian plan is not yet public, but it appears to consist primarily of a development blueprint for reconstruction. Although specific rebuilding proposals may fly with Washington, an exclusively development-focused plan is not enough. So far, Cairo's reported (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/egypt-hosts-fatah-hamas-post-war-gaza-talks-part-ceasefire-efforts-2024-11-02/>) approach to addressing Gaza's political future has stuck to the repeatedly failed formula of getting Fatah and Hamas to agree on a committee for managing postwar governance in Gaza. This is a nonstarter—after the October 7 attack on Israel, any continued Hamas role in Gaza, overt or not, is unacceptable to Washington and Jerusalem.

It is also unclear if Egypt's plan includes an Arab security role in Gaza—another potentially fatal omission given that Washington and other actors have emphasized the need for boots on the ground to stabilize the area if a longer-term ceasefire is reached. Similarly, as Arab states continue to insist on a role for the Palestinian Authority, it will fall on them to come up with a serious plan for building the PA's capacity (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reforming-palestinian-authority-roadmap-change>) and credibility (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pa-reform-key-west-bank-stability-and-possible-rule-gaza>).

Cairo may have formulated reconstruction plans on its own, but addressing the politically delicate issues of Hamas, Gaza security, and PA reform will require a collective effort that exceeds the traditional "lowest common denominator" Arab consensus. Leaders will then have to sell their position at the imminent Arab League summit.

## From Serious Business to Posturing?

Tomorrow's Riyadh meeting will convene Arab leaders who have major political and security equities in the future

**T** of Gaza, so their deliberations will likely reflect the seriousness of these interests. In contrast, the March 4 summit in Cairo involves a much wider audience and may showcase very different dynamics. Historically, Arab League deliberations on Palestine have been characterized by posturing and pretension on issues that would be better served by serious policy attention; the Cairo summit could devolve into more of the same, at least from countries not as directly affected by the Gaza war.

For example, Tunisian president Kais Saied has adopted harsh but empty populist stances throughout the war and will likely continue this tone in Cairo. Algeria has spent the past year using the Palestinian issue as a cudgel in its feud with neighboring Morocco, which normalized relations with Israel in 2020. It may therefore decide to spend the summit expressing maximalist positions on Gaza in order to distinguish itself in intra-Arab relations.

More important, Cairo attendees may fall victim to a problem that has plagued past summits: allowing the policy positions of Iran's so-called "axis of resistance" to limit collective Arab flexibility. This was on vivid display at the 2002 Beirut summit, when Saudi Arabia proposed what later became known as the Arab Peace Initiative. At the time, Lebanon—under pressure from Syrian occupiers and Iran—introduced amendments that hardened the Saudi initiative and diluted its impact on Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy.

Today, months of Israeli military action have substantially degraded Iran's axis, establishing more auspicious conditions for the Cairo summit. New leaders in Syria and Lebanon will be making their Arab League debut, presumably bringing outlooks and priorities that differ from their Tehran-aligned predecessors.

In Syria, new leader Ahmed al-Sharaa is supportive of Palestinians, but his tone is quite different from the Assad regime's. Given the **fragility of his new transitional government (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/status-syrias-transition-after-two-months>)**, he likely has little interest in alienating moderate Arab states or Washington by taking strident positions on Gaza.

Lebanon is **more complicated (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanons-new-government-may-walk-thin-line-between-promises-and-compromises>)** given the ongoing influence of Iran's top regional proxy, Hezbollah. Yet the group's military defeat has enabled the selection of a new president and prime minister who are more invested in strengthening relations with the United States and moderate Arab states, and less constrained by Iranian pressure.

The task of managing these complexities will primarily fall to Egypt—as the summit's host and drafter of the nascent Arab plan on Gaza—and Saudi Arabia, the current diplomatic leader of the Arab world. Success will be defined by their ability to convince participants at the Cairo summit to (1) endorse the conclusions reached by the five-country group at the prior Riyadh meeting, and (2) delegate follow-up diplomacy to that same group without the inclusion of potential spoilers. The resultant Arab initiative on Gaza should include the following:

- specifics on the number of troops that will be deployed and who will provide them
- a detailed governance plan to strengthen the PA and exclude Hamas
- detailed plans for disarming Hamas
- a blueprint for reconstruction that does not displace Palestinians

It would also be useful for attendees to discuss options for allowing Palestinian noncombatants to leave Gaza if they no longer want to reside there. To improve the chances of Washington and Israel accepting the plan, officials would be wise to coordinate the draft prior to the full Arab Summit.

## Consequences of Inaction

**M**uch like President Trump's 2020 "Vision for Peace"—which was broadly rejected by Palestinians but did help

facilitate the Abraham Accords between Israel and multiple Arab states—the disruptive nature of Trump’s current Gaza proposal provides opportunities to advance U.S. and allied interests in the region. In particular, it may force Arab states to put skin in the game and finally commit their blood and treasure to stabilizing and reconstructing Gaza. If that scenario actually comes to fruition—and without forcibly displacing Palestinians—then Trump’s gambit may succeed.

The downside is that if momentum falters at the Cairo summit and Arab states fail to come together on comprehensive, forward-leaning involvement in Gaza, then Trump’s plan may wind up increasing regional instability. Five Arab-Israeli peace treaties and normalization agreements have survived the Gaza war, but it is doubtful that all would remain intact amid the forced transfer of Gazans, which the Israeli government may perceive it has a green light to carry out given Trump’s statements. A rupture of U.S.-Jordanian relations **would be disastrous** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/king-abdullah-must-show-trump-practical-arab-ideas-gaza>) for both the kingdom and Israel. The consequences of a breach with Egypt **would be problematic** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/improving-egypt-israel-relations-shadow-gaza>) as well. Since 2013, Israel has permitted Egypt to exceed the terms of the Camp David peace treaty and re-militarize the Sinai Peninsula in order to fight the Islamic State. Amid heightened tensions over Gaza, Egypt is **reportedly** (<https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/cew59xdxx1qo>) reinforcing its army positions on the Israeli border and ordering its forces to “maintain the highest level of combat readiness.”

Indeed, Trump’s talk of a Gaza Riviera has spurred a frenzy of regional activity, with U.S. partner reactions ranging from consternation to despair. Yet if the resultant diplomacy produces a **comprehensive, coordinated action plan** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-trump-arab-leaders-and-israel-can-close-gaps-gaza>), this moment of crisis could become an opportunity for Gazans and the entire region.

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