

Voluntary Refugee Resettlement: A Possible Solution to Clashing Visions for Gaza Reconstruction

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Brief Analysis

Refocusing postwar plans on this concept could result in 40 percent or more of Gaza’s population leaving of their own accord—a prospect that should spur U.S. and Arab leaders to reconcile their differing proposals and expedite their preparations for reconstruction.

When President Trump announced his provocative proposal to relocate Palestinians while Gaza is cleared of hazards and rebuilt, he put the fate of the war-torn territory’s nearly two million residents on the Middle East’s **front burner** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-trump-arab-leaders-and-israel-can-close-gaps-gaza>) for the first time in recent memory. Indeed, Arab leaders met in Cairo this week and endorsed a counterproposal to begin reconstruction without moving Palestinians outside the territory.

Both ideas have their faults—the Arab plan would keep Gazans in the Strip even if many of them want to leave (see below); Trump’s initial proposal seemed to envision forcing them out against their will, whether for the duration of the estimated decade-long reconstruction process or permanently. And neither idea offers clear answers on how to get from the current situation—an imperiled ceasefire on the verge of renewed warfare—to a post-conflict, Hamas-free Gaza that is ready for reconstruction. (In a stunning omission, the Arab plan does not even mention Hamas.) Still, both proposals are bigger and bolder than any previous effort to address the war’s destruction.

For now, the prospects of transitioning to the reconstruction phase will be determined by ongoing discussions on phase 2 of the Hamas-Israel ceasefire agreement. The fitful nature of these talks so far and the steady stream of Hamas provocations on the hostage issue have raised concerns that Israel may return to full-scale war, this time with the goal of ending the group’s local control completely rather than just degrading its military capabilities. Either way, however, leaders will inevitably have to reconcile the clashing U.S. and Arab visions of “reconstruction-in-place” vs. relocation-based reconstruction.

A Focus on Refugees

At first glance, the differences between these approaches may appear unbridgeable—at least until one recalls an unusual aspect of Gaza’s demography that is missing from both proposals, namely, the fact that 75 percent of the population is formally registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) as “Palestine refugees” displaced from other areas by the 1947-49 war (or, more likely by this point, descended from those refugees). In other words, three-quarters of Gaza residents publicly declare that they have no legal or national connections to the Strip itself and have accepted UN refugee benefits pending final resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. (Importantly, this historic refugee status should not be confused with the near-term situation of those Gazans who may seek safe haven from the current war.)

Conventional wisdom long held that the refugee problem could only be resolved in the context of creating a Palestinian state. But statehood was already a distant prospect before Hamas’s October 7 attack on Israel; today, even discussing a potential “pathway” toward statehood is a hotly contested issue. Waiting for diplomacy to catch up to the human reality in Gaza is not an acceptable reason to delay addressing the plight of local residents.

Highlighting the refugee factor may therefore provide a way to bridge the Arab and Trump proposals. After all, neither the White House nor Arab governments can realistically believe that there will be two multi-billion-dollar initiatives to redress issues in Gaza—one now, to repair damage from the latest war, and a second, off in the future, when the politics of the peace process are ripe for resolution of the refugee issue. To the contrary, the postwar reconstruction process is the most logical and propitious moment to address all of Gaza’s major problems, so the refugee situation should take center stage.

Of course, focusing on refugees now should not be used as an excuse to negate Palestinian national identity, sidestep their historic conflict with Israel over the disposition of territories occupied in 1967, or avoid addressing legitimate Palestinian claims for self-determination. Similarly, spotlighting the refugee issue is not a call to fix the many problems (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/evaluating-unrwa-after-colonna-report>) of UNRWA, as useful as that would be (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/replacing-unrwa-opportunity-trump-should-not-miss>). Rather, this is a very simple plea for the parties to recognize that there is sufficient attention, momentum, and money to address the Gaza refugee question now, in the context of postwar reconstruction.

Outline of a Voluntary Resettlement Approach

The last time the Palestinian refugee issue was discussed with any seriousness was twenty-five years ago, when Gaza had 600,000 fewer registered refugees (<https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/uscri/2000/en/93264>). In December 2000, a few months after an Israeli-Palestinian summit at Camp David failed, President Bill Clinton issued his “peace parameters” to help guide future peacemaking. Among other provisions, the parameters called for an internationally managed system in which refugees would have the choice of either settling in a new Palestinian state, receiving permanent residence in their current host countries, or immigrating to third countries, with a small number possibly resettling in Israel if it agreed to accept them.

That basic architecture would still work today. Given clear options, some Palestinians would choose to stay in Gaza and renounce their refugee status in exchange for the deed to a new home of their own. Others, with the promise of compensation, would no doubt jump at the chance to move—whether to the West Bank, an Arab or Muslim country, or elsewhere, depending on how wide the doors to asylum, permanent residency, and even citizenship swing open around the world. An independent international body could be set up to oversee this process and organize lotteries to determine where refugees could go and when—subject to host-country immigration laws and security reviews, of

course.

The numbers are not nearly as daunting as one might think. For example, even if half of Gaza’s refugee population chose to relocate over a ten-year reconstruction period, that would average out to around 70,000 per year, which is a large figure compared to the world’s annual number of resettled asylum seekers (which has averaged nearly 100,000 (<https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2024-chapter-2/refugees-and-asylum-seekers#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20the%20global%20number,increase%20from%20the%20previous%20year.>) over the past decade), but only a tiny percentage of the world’s estimated 281 million migrants (<https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/msite/wmr-2024-interactive/>). Gaza refugees would be somewhere in between—they would not quite be asylum seekers, since they would be leaving a post-conflict zone in an organized, well-supported matter, but they would not quite be migrants either, at least in the sense of solely seeking economic opportunity. More to the point, their plight has the entire world’s attention at the moment, so finding homes for 70,000 per year is not an insurmountable burden.

Arab states currently want it both ways: on one hand, they argue that Gazans have such a firm attachment to the land that few would ever leave voluntarily; on the other hand, they reject the very idea of voluntary relocation because they fear numerous Gazans would in fact take that option—more than their societies can absorb. Washington should not accept this contradictory position.

As it turns out, Gazans have steadily emigrated from the Strip for years, with few political repercussions abroad. According to World Bank statistics (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.NETM?locations=PS>), which combine Gaza and the West Bank, the territories have had twenty-seven consecutive years of negative demographic outflow, averaging about 20,000 emigrants per year since 1998. In Gaza, a recent Palestinian research study noted (<https://palthink.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/In-Search-of-Hope-Gaza-Youth-Face-Death.pdf>), “Since 2007, local reports have confirmed that over 250,000 youths migrated from the Gaza Strip in pursuit of a thriving life in Europe. In August 2023, alone, there were over 16,700 Turkish visa applications submitted by young adults living in the Gaza Strip’s five [governorates].” And all of this movement occurred before the war—one can only imagine today’s pent-up demand for leaving the Strip and seeking a better life elsewhere.

Ultimately, refocusing postwar plans for Gaza on the concept of voluntary refugee resettlement could result in 40 percent or more of the Strip’s total population leaving of their own accord. This approach may therefore hold the key to reconciling U.S. and Arab plans while dramatically improving the prospects for safe and expeditious reconstruction.

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