

# Israel Has Its Best Chance for Peace in 25 Years

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Articles & Testimony

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**After seeing President Clinton’s chance at a deal slip away, America’s former top peace envoy explains how Trump has a wide—but brief—window to press Arab and Israeli leaders on resolving the Gaza conflict and other regional issues.**

**T**wenty-five years ago this week, I was at Camp David as President Bill Clinton’s lead Middle East negotiator. We sought to resolve the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and to produce peace between two national movements competing for the same space.

In July 2000, we were optimistic about ending the conflict. Over the preceding seven years, since the beginning of the [Oslo process \(https://history.state.gov/milestones/1993-2000/oslo\)](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1993-2000/oslo)—which provided mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization and called for the creation of a Palestinian Authority (PA) to negotiate peace with Israel—we had produced four partial agreements: the [Gaza-Jericho Agreement \(https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-185298/\)](https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-185298/), the [Interim Agreement \(https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-185434/\)](https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-185434/), the [Hebron Protocol \(https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-196311/\)](https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-196311/) and the [Wye River Memorandum \(https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-176306/\)](https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-176306/).

But in two weeks at Camp David, even as his negotiators signaled some flexibility, Yasser Arafat, the PA president, rejected every proposal we made. At one point he told Clinton that we would be walking in his funeral procession if he accepted what the US was asking.

Arafat did allow his representatives space to negotiate afterward, and in December he and I met privately. He said he could accept the ideas I laid out for overcoming the gaps on the core issues of Jerusalem, refugees, borders and

security. We brought Israeli and Palestinian negotiating teams to Washington to try to finalize an agreement, and when they could not, both sides asked us to present a bridging proposal that became known as the “[Clinton parameters \(https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-203898/\)](https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-203898/).” While Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak accepted them, Arafat did not. Instead, he reignited violence and the second intifada, a five-year uprising in which thousands died on both sides. There has been no political progress between Israelis and Palestinians since then, even though Israel withdrew unilaterally from Gaza in 2005.

The Abraham Accords in 2020, during President Donald Trump’s first term, marked the expansion of Arab-Israeli peace, with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco normalizing relations with Israel. President Joe Biden sought to deepen the cooperation those accords promised. By 2023, the administration was on the verge of working out a pact with Saudi Arabia: The Saudis would get a defense treaty with the US and American support for an expansive nuclear-energy industry, in return for normalizing relations and making peace with Israel.

Hamas’s onslaught on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, was motivated in part by the desire to kill the prospect of this deal. Saudi officials later told me that had Israel succeeded more quickly in defeating Hamas without destroying much of Gaza and killing so many people there, normalization would have already taken place.

But the death and destruction in Gaza has soured many Arab publics on Israel, and their leaders are mindful of this mood. At the same time, these Arab leaders are not unhappy that Israel has vastly weakened Iran and devastated its regional proxies.

Iran’s loss of much of its coercive capability—and its need to focus domestically on preserving the regime—creates an opportunity for peace and regional integration. Even with all the uncertainty in Lebanon and [especially in Syria \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/16/israel-strikes-syria-defence-ministry-in-third-day-of-attacks-on-the-country\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/16/israel-strikes-syria-defence-ministry-in-third-day-of-attacks-on-the-country), the potential may exist to negotiate non-belligerency agreements, if not full normalization, with Israel.

Trump rightly wants to capitalize on the changed balance of power in the region to produce Saudi normalization with Israel and expand the Abraham Accords. Timing is to statecraft what location is to real estate: In other words, seize the moment.

But given Arab attitudes, nothing can happen until the war in Gaza ends and the Israeli military withdraws. Israel has already defeated Hamas as a military, but it seeks to ensure that the group no longer controls Gaza. For that, there must be an alternative to Hamas. At this point, neither the Trump administration nor Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel has developed a credible “day after” plan to prevent a vacuum in Gaza.

Nor have the Arabs presented a credible plan for the demilitarization of Gaza, despite the reality that there will be no serious reconstruction without it. No one will offer meaningful investment in Gaza if Hamas can reconstitute itself militarily, making certain that war will erupt again.

Even if the current talks over creating a 60-day ceasefire are successful, nothing will change if it does not lead to ending the war in Gaza, the release of all Israeli hostages, and the withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces. If Netanyahu is to take advantage of the moment Israel’s military achievements have created, he will need to accept both this and a transitional administration led by the UAE, Egypt, Morocco and the Saudis, with participation from the PA.

The Arab leaders must assume the responsibility of making sure that the Palestinian Authority undergoes serious reforms: President Mahmoud Abbas assumes a ceremonial position, a newly empowered and internationally credible prime minister is appointed, and transparent financial, investment and budgeting processes are created and monitored by the World Bank. Gaza under the PA’s leadership, even after a transitional period of two to three years, is an illusion without such changes.

Without an end to Palestinian division and incitement, talk of a Palestinian state is little more than a slogan. Arab leaders must help deliver reforms, and a practical approach that begins to demonstrate that a Palestinian state won't be a failed state.

As long as Israelis believe any Palestinian state will be dominated by Hamas or other extremists, they will be reluctant to embrace even the idea any time soon. Still, the Israeli government cannot act on the ground in ways that make a Palestinian state impossible—which is exactly what is now happening in the West Bank. Trump must use his leverage on Netanyahu to prevent the continual expansion of Israeli settlements, the increasing pressure on Palestinians, and the annexation that **members of his party (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/likud-ministers-urge-netanyahu-to-annex-west-bank-by-the-end-of-the-month/>)**, Likud, are calling for.

History creates moments of opportunity, but they rarely last. With Iran and the forces that depend on conflict weakened, this is the chance to forge a new coalition of countries that favor social and economic progress instead of war.

The opportunity is real, but it won't happen by itself. We failed 25 years ago to get Arab states either to press Arafat to accept the Clinton parameters or to give him the cover to do so. Today, Trump can prevent this moment from being lost, but only if he insists that Arab leaders and Israelis assume responsibility and resist their own forces of rejection.

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