

Three Years After October 7: A Bridge or Chasm Between Peoples?

by [Nitzan Alon \(/experts/nitzan-alon\)](#), [Ghaith al-Omari \(/experts/ghaith-al-omari\)](#), [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#), [Ksenia Svetlova \(/experts/ksenia-svetlova\)](#)

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Brief Analysis

Former American, Israeli, and PA officials reflect on the anniversary of the October 7 attack and the devastating war that followed, offering practical ideas for gradually closing the enormous trust gap that has reopened since 2023.

On October 2, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Nitzan Alon, Ghaith al-Omari, Dennis Ross, and Ksenia Svetlova. Maj. Gen. Alon served as the Israel Defense Forces point person for hostage negotiations after October 7; previously, he headed IDF Central Command. Omari is the Gilbert Foundation Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and a former advisor to the Palestinian negotiating team in 1999-2001. Ross, the Institute's counselor and Davidson Distinguished Fellow, previously served in multiple U.S. administrations, including as the president's special envoy for Middle East peace. Svetlova is executive director of the Regional Organization for Peace, Economics, and Security (ROPES) and a former member of the Israeli Knesset.

Note: The following is a rapporteurs' summary of the event and should not be attributed as direct quotes by any of the speakers. For verbatim remarks, please consult the video replay of the event.

Nitzan Alon

There is no doubt that the past three years have been a difficult period for Israeli society. My experience as the point person on hostages put me in close, constant contact with both their families and the country's political leadership. Although I do not wish to place blame on any single leader, it seems clear that the war could have ended a year earlier than it did, with the same deal for releasing all of the hostages. This could have prevented the deaths of many IDF soldiers, Palestinians, and hostages, some of whom were killed during their captivity. The war was too long—Israel could have reached the same strategic achievements regarding the elimination of Hamas's military power much earlier. Despite these hardships, Israelis showed solidarity by taking to the streets for demonstrations with the families of the hostages every Saturday night for 105 weeks.

Israelis saw with their own eyes how Hamas terrorists attacked from within Israeli territory itself. The violence of that day was broadcast on social

media, and for many Israelis, these incidents brought to mind horrible memories of the Holocaust. The attack also shattered the public's sense of security in their borders and any hope that Israel was in a place to make compromises in pursuit of peace or a two-state solution. It is now difficult for Israelis to separate Hamas from other Palestinians or show empathy toward the loss and trauma on the Palestinian side. Meanwhile, Israeli politicians are pursuing policies like forcible emigration of Gazans from Gaza, buffer zones that separate Israel from its enemies, and preemptive force to stop a future attack.

Israeli society is especially polarized now with the upcoming election. Looking toward the future, however, Israelis need leaders who offer solutions through hope, not delusions or slogans. They need a government that can manage their economic, societal, and security challenges responsibly. Although October 7 created serious pessimism about Israel's relationship with the Palestinians, there are important opportunities to advance in Lebanon and Syria—steps that can change Israel's relationship with the Arab world for the better.

Ghaith al-Omari

If the Palestinians want to process and ultimately learn lessons from this tragedy, real self-examination is required. Some Palestinians did indeed celebrate on October 7. To a far greater degree, however, the prevailing sentiment in Gaza immediately following the Hamas attack was fear. This was not the first war between Hamas and Israel, and Gazans knew the aftermath of the group's assault would be devastating. The collective trauma of the Palestinian people over the past three years has been immense, with Gazans facing the disintegration of their social institutions and social fabric. Their trauma mirrors that experienced by Israel in some ways—just as October 7 brought a new sense of vulnerability linked to the historical traumas of the Jewish people, the subsequent war reminded Palestinians of their own historical vulnerability.

Today, the general sentiment among Palestinians is anger at everyone who failed to help them—Hamas, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the international community. After the ceasefire, when it appeared that Hamas would be pushed out of power, their anger took the form of protests against the group. But as progress stalled over the past year, Gazans increasingly came to believe that demonstrations are futile, and that Hamas will never be displaced.

What the people need most immediately is humanitarian help—not just food and water, but critical infrastructure like health facilities, sanitation, and prefabricated shelters instead of tents. Once those dire needs are addressed, authorities need to remove Hamas and replace it with an alternative power structure. The path to this goal is credible and has been laid out in both President Trump's [twenty-point plan \(https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/read-trumps-20-point-proposal-to-end-the-war-in-gaza\)](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/read-trumps-20-point-proposal-to-end-the-war-in-gaza) and the fifteen-point [implementation roadmap \(https://boardofpeace.org/gaza-roadmap\)](https://boardofpeace.org/gaza-roadmap) agreed to this July, which created the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG) as a transitional authority. Until Hamas is disarmed, however, no reconstruction or investment is plausible, and the group will remain functionally in control of Gaza. Hamas is already reestablishing the same patterns that emerged before October 7—extortion, taxation, consolidation of power—but now the United States is lending it credibility by holding high-level meetings with its leadership.

To prevent the group from cementing its grip, further implementation of the twenty-point plan must begin immediately. For example, although the new 16,000-member Palestinian police force cannot be deployed to Gaza yet, most of its officers still need training and [should be permitted to begin that process \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chapeau-assessing-gaza-ceasefire-year-one\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chapeau-assessing-gaza-ceasefire-year-one) immediately.

In the longer term, the PA will have to unite Gaza and the West Bank under a single leadership. It must also undertake an extensive reform project in order to start the path toward statehood. Those Arab governments who have the greatest leverage over the Palestinians should start pressuring them now to move in the right direction. If necessary, the United States should lean on its Arab partners, promising to use American leverage over Israel if they use theirs over the Palestinians.

For now, Israelis and Palestinians deeply distrust each other, and neither side has a leader with the domestic legitimacy needed to make big, difficult decisions. The idea of cooperation is politically untenable for leaders with weak and divided constituencies. In this sense, Gaza may present an opportunity—the daily cooperation that will be necessary to rebuild the shattered territory may remind both peoples that working together presents better outcomes for each of them.

Dennis Ross

When the October 7 attack took place, the only two Arab countries to initially condemn Hamas by name were the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. This fact speaks to the level of blowback that the rest of the Arab world expected to face, and how much they feared the instinctive reactions of their publics. Today, a peace based on genuine acceptance and recognition of legitimacy is distant, so U.S. officials should start by emphasizing that violence is unacceptable. This could help create a reality in which actors who commit atrocities are universally deemed illegitimate. In reaching for the eventual goal of real peace, Washington's first main challenge is twofold: creating a set of standards and expectations, and calling out countries who are unable to condemn inhumane acts.

As for the Israelis and Palestinians, both sides need the right kind of leaders to step forward—figures who are prepared to assume responsibility, be held accountable, courageously face up to where they are now, and actually lead the public rather than just following public opinion. In Israel, it has been difficult to overcome the trauma of October 7 because there is no state inquiry commission to confront the lessons learned, allow for a release, and give people closure. In Gaza and the West Bank, the people need leaders who are prepared to move beyond slogans, create facts on the ground, and focus on creating the institutions needed for statehood from the ground up.

As the situation currently stands, a Palestinian state is not a possibility in the near term—such a goal is beyond what the Israeli public could accept right now, and the Palestinian public is not ready for it either. Before a state can be established, Hamas must be fully sidelined, the PA must undertake serious reform, and the Arab states must be brought in to act as a backstop. And as Arab leaders press the PA to fulfill its reform obligations, U.S. officials must

work with Israel on its own hard choices.

The two societies have mutual trauma and have become unable to visualize each other's pain. Hence, bringing them to the table now would be a bad idea, as they would be consumed with bringing charges and accusations against each other. A good mediator would not even consider bringing them to the table until they have points of commonality; currently, the political and psychological gaps are greater than they have ever been.

In the meantime, the work that NGOs are doing to bring the two peoples together is heroic but largely unseen. Various forms of cooperation take place every day. For instance, Israel has an interest in solving Gaza's sewage problem because the same sewage flows to Israel's shores and forces it to shut down desalination plants; likewise, Israel sent COVID-19 vaccines to the PA because it knows that health emergencies do not respect borders. In other words, cooperation has continued, and U.S. officials should give instances like these more visibility. By doing so, they could help reestablish the idea that Israelis and Palestinians can work together on practical, everyday things, and then build on that understanding over time.

Ksenia Svetlova

Both sides are currently locked in their respective echo chambers, where they feel secure within their own narratives. At times like this, people often struggle with challenges to their narrative because it is difficult to see oneself as both a victim and a perpetrator. During the war, for example, Al Jazeera viewers often heard about "heroic actions by members of the Palestinian Resistance against soldiers and settlers," but they did not hear about the Israeli children and elderly people who were taken hostage or the young women who were butchered. Similarly, most Israeli media showed aerial footage from buildings and reports about events in Gaza, but they did not depict the immense human tragedy that was taking place on the ground.

Moreover, the scale of disinformation being spread by elements inside and outside Israel has damaged the public's trust in the media, which must be restored. Recent Israeli polls also show low levels of trust in the government, the Knesset, and the courts. To address this worrisome trend, the government must stop inciting against other branches of authority and take full responsibility for its failures, rather than allowing the army and Shin Bet to do so alone. The upcoming election is preventing politicians from acknowledging their part in the tragedies of October 7. The public needs a change so they can begin healing.

After that, Israelis must begin to think about their relations with the Palestinians—their closest neighbors—not just with the UAE, Bahrain, and other Arab countries. Rebuilding that relationship will take time, but it is not an impossible task. Trust needs to be rebuilt slowly and requires responsible people on both sides. Israeli society has been here before—trust was broken after the second intifada raged in 2000-2005, yet once new Palestinian leadership emerged, the Israeli public willingly supported further negotiations in 2007.

The abysmal trust gap has had political ramifications in Israel's upcoming election. Big issues like borders, relations with Palestinians, and the fate of the West Bank are not part of most major campaigns. When they are discussed, it is by far-right parties pushing their ideas for "transfer"—that is, the forced displacement of Palestinians, a notion that started floating around before October 7 but has since flourished without refutation from the government.

This summary was prepared by Kate Chesnutt, Nava Goldstein, and Joelle Rosenthal. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Winkler Lowy Foundation. ❖

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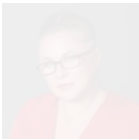
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