

Trump Can Push Past Israeli-Palestinian Paralysis

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Their mutual trauma won't go away any time soon, but practical improvements, U.S. pressure, and greater Arab involvement can help show both populations that incremental change is possible.

Three years after Oct. 7, 2023, the prospects for meaningful Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic progress appear worse than ever. Israelis look at the way Hamas celebrated killing innocents and brutalizing hostages and conclude that they could never be safe alongside an independent Palestinian state. Palestinians look at many Israelis' indifference to their deaths and continued suffering in Gaza and are equally convinced that Israel will never accept their independence or let them live with security and dignity.

Peacemaking in such an environment seems hopeless—and hopelessness provides fertile ground for the extremists to promote violence, claiming the conflict can only end with the destruction of the other side. Which is why, as daunting as the current environment is, it is more important than ever to show that practical, positive changes are possible.

First, it is important to recognize that actual cooperation is taking place between Israelis and Palestinians even now, for example, in managing the sewage problem in Gaza. Sewage from Gaza flows directly to the Israeli coastline and, from time to time, has necessitated [closing](https://www.jpost.com/jerusalem-report/article-884626) Israel's nearby desalination plant at Ashkelon. Not surprisingly, there are nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), like the Arava Institute in Israel, that bring Israelis and Palestinians together to work on water, sanitation, health, environment, and related economic issues and challenges.

All this needs to become far more visible. The Trump administration—whether through Jared Kushner's team or through the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, or through the U.S. embassy—should promote,

participate in, and publicize such meetings. It should also provide funds, or solicit them from partners, for NGOs whose mission is to **foster (<https://arava.org/>) cooperation (<https://ecopeaceme.org/>) between (<https://www.rozana.org/>)** Israelis and Palestinians on functional issues.

Second, the realities on the ground must be transformed. In Gaza, U.S. President Donald Trump's 20-point peace plan produced a cease-fire a year ago and helped secure the release of the remaining hostages. The basic formula built into the Trump plan was the demilitarization of Gaza in return for reconstruction and Israeli withdrawal. A year later, Palestinians in Gaza are still living in wretched conditions, and Hamas coercively controls about 30 percent to 35 percent of the territory, including a vast majority of its population.

The promise of the 20 points remains on paper but not on the ground, where there has been no disarmament, no reconstruction, and no Israel Defense Forces withdrawal. Similarly, the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG)—the 15-member body of Palestinian technocrats designed to govern Gaza on a transitional basis—remains in Cairo, not Gaza. So long as it is not in Gaza, it cannot begin to demonstrate that there is an alternative to Hamas rule. (The initial tranche of Palestinian police who are to provide security for the NCAG also remains in Cairo.) Moreover, the International Stabilization Force (ISF), which is to back up the Palestinian police, monitor Hamas's disarming, and oversee the borders to prevent smuggling, is only now organizing and will not deploy to Gaza until the NCAG and the Palestinian police are entering the strip.

After long months of talks and prodding, Nickolay Mladenov, the Board of Peace's high representative, working with Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey, reached agreement with Hamas on a 15-point road map to implement the Trump plan. This agreement, **announced (<https://boardofpeace.org/gaza-roadmap>)** on July 30, committed Hamas to a process of decommissioning all of its weaponry in phases. And yet, in no small part because of the October Israeli election and his political base's opposition to the 15 points, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he **did not accept (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-rejects-trumps-15-point-plan-gaza-pm-netanyahu-says-2026-08-09/>)** the road map—leading to the plan's being put on hold until after the Israeli election.

While Israelis are in general skeptical that Hamas will actually disarm, the 15-point road map puts Hamas to the test. It is in Israel's interest to put the onus on Hamas and not keep it on itself. If Hamas fails to do what it agreed to, Israel will be in a far better position to apply military pressure. But if the plans for decommissioning proceed, that will allow the NCAG, Palestinian police, and the ISF to deploy to Gaza. Then the process of rebuilding Gaza under an alternative to Hamas will finally begin.

Both sides continue to wonder whether the Trump plan and the road map will ever be implemented. Israelis may be skeptical that Hamas will credibly disarm, but Palestinians are skeptical that Israel will allow rebuilding and withdraw. Putting the NCAG in a position where it can begin to deliver portable and pre-fab housing before winter sets in would do wonders for its credibility and buy it time to produce more in terms of governance. Showing that Gaza can be transformed will also have the benefit of restoring a sense of possibility about what might be done between Israelis and Palestinians.

Third, Arab states must play a more active role. Historically, Arab leaders have generally limited their role to offering slogans and saying they would agree to whatever the Palestinians accepted. That was a way to avoid responsibility and leave the conflict to others, such as the United States, to resolve. To make progress, key Arab states—what used to be called the Arab Quint, of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar—need to play two roles: In the near term, they should get serious about producing real reform in the Palestinian Authority (PA). This means creating credible standards of reform, providing incentives for meeting them, and making clear they will call out the PA should it fall short.

Arab states also need to create an umbrella of support for the hard decisions the Palestinian leadership will have to

take. There is no peacemaking without concessions—and Palestinian leaders will need to cover any steps they take that seem to address Israeli needs. Arab leaders must endorse these hard decisions and defend them.

Key Arab states like Saudi Arabia can play one other role to help Palestinians: They can offer further outreach to Israel in return for concessions to the Palestinians. The Saudis, for example, could allow direct commercial ties with Israeli companies in return for Israel stopping de facto annexation, and modifying the Paris Protocol of 1994 that governs economic ties between Israel and the PA and significantly limits Palestinian commercial and economic activity.

Finally, the Trump administration needs to hold Israel accountable. That starts with insistence that this Israeli government act demonstrably and systematically to stop the extremist attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank. In addition, Trump should make clear that he expects the next Israeli government to do its part to fulfill his plan and the 15-point road map. While insisting that Hamas and the PA must deliver on their commitments, including on de-radicalization, he will want Israeli—and Palestinian—leaders to understand that if Hamas and the PA follow through, Israel will be held to its commitments as well.

The mutual trauma of Israelis and Palestinians won't go away any time soon. But for now, both sides must again be convinced that change is possible. The Trump administration must push all parties for the practical steps that will end the current paralysis.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. Previously, he served in multiple Democratic and Republican administrations, including as the president's special envoy for Middle East peace. This article was originally published [on the Foreign Policy website](https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/10/19/trump-israel-palestine-gaza-west-bank-peace-elections/)

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