

A Path Forward for Team Trump on Israel and Gaza: Follow Nickolay Mladenov's Lead

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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Using the money cut from UNRWA to restore electricity, water, and sewage treatment in Gaza could help prevent another conflict and reopen peace diplomacy.

Nickolay Mladenov is the UN Coordinator on the Peace Process. A former defense minister of Bulgaria, he brings a straightforward approach to his task. As a former lead negotiator for our country, I have known others in this role, and he is unlike any of them. They tended to reflect the structural bias of the UN against Israel and often saw their role as representing the Palestinians.

Mladenov is mindful of the needs of both sides. Even as he tries to respond to their needs, he does not hesitate to call out each side for behaviors that are inconsistent with peace. With the Israelis, he criticizes their settlement activities that make the Palestinians feel powerless and that, when outside the blocs, appear to pre-empt a two-state outcome. With the Palestinians, he criticizes their incitement and is quick to condemn Mahmoud Abbas for using age-old anti-Semitic tropes in a speech given earlier this year.

Mladenov now is working to prevent another round of combat between the Israelis and Hamas in Gaza. This past week, I appeared on a panel with him in Jerusalem where he explained that the dire economic conditions in Gaza—electricity only three hours a day, essentially no safe drinking water, no fuel to power sewage treatment plants—are creating a reality in which Palestinians have nothing to lose.

He does not defend Hamas efforts to divert attention away from its failings in governing—or its diversion of construction materials to tunnels for attacks on Israel. Quite the contrary. However, his main focus presently is not his criticisms but the terrible humanitarian situation in Gaza, a reality he is convinced will trigger a new conflict

soon.

It is a conflict that no one can win. Israel can defeat Hamas militarily, but then what? The Palestinian Authority under Abbas can't ride into Gaza on the back of Israeli tanks and take over. Hamas understands the consequence of a new war with Israel; it knows it will pay a great price, with no certainty that its competitors like Islamic Jihad backed by the Iranians or al Qaeda or ISIS elements won't take advantage of its defeat. That won't leave Israel better off or make the next conflict less likely. Development of Gaza might.

Mladenov is working on that. He knows that given the realities and the mood in Gaza, Hamas cannot appear to be blocking a genuine international effort to relieve the conditions—and its leaders acknowledge that to him and other diplomats with whom I have spoken. So he is putting together an international trust fund that could be used immediately to implement projects on electricity, water and sewage treatment.

The trust fund and its implementing mechanism would be run internationally and not have to work through either Hamas or the Palestinian Authority. (By stopping payments to Israel for electricity provided to Gaza and slashing the salaries that the PA has paid to workers there since Hamas took over in 2007, Abbas has considerably worsened an already difficult economic reality. He thinks he is squeezing Hamas—unfortunately, it is the people of Gaza who are paying.)

While Mladenov is making progress, he could use American help. With Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt traveling to the region this week, there is an opportunity to boost his efforts. They both understand that the regional context needs to change if they are to launch a peace plan—particularly at a time when Abbas and Palestinian Authority officials won't even meet with them.

The last thing they or the region need is another conflict between Israel and Hamas like the one in 2014 that lasted 52 days and imposed a terrible toll on Palestinians. Averting such a conflict is essential if Arab leaders are to respond to the plan notwithstanding Palestinian efforts to dismiss it. Moreover, if the Trump administration could show it helped to alleviate Palestinian suffering in Gaza, key Arab leaders would likely be more open to the plan.

So this is a good week not just to push the Mladenov efforts but to invest in the trust fund he has created—and to get the Saudis, Emirates and Qataris to do so as well. They should not want a new Israeli-Hamas war, knowing that Iran right now is pushing for such a conflict to roil the region and put Sunni Arab leaders on the defensive as Palestinian losses in Gaza are bound to be high.

Since Arab leaders will want to see that the U.S. is also putting money into the fund, why not take the money that the Trump administration cut from UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees? UNRWA certainly has many problems, but it also pays 13,000 workers in Gaza and provides meals through its schools.

Use the money taken from UNRWA and let it contribute to restoring electricity, water and sewage treatment. In so doing, it might just head off the next Gazan war and lend credence to the peace efforts of Kushner and Greenblatt.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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