

J STREET POLICY CENTER SYMPOSIUM

A PATH FORWARD: Rebuilding Gaza and Creating a Political Horizon for Israel-Palestine



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Amid the Israel-Hamas war, the J Street Policy Center held a symposium on the topic of rebuilding Gaza and creating a political horizon for Israel-Palestine, gathering experts based in Washington, DC and from Israel, Palestine, and the broader region to discuss a path forward from this crisis. To kick off the symposium, J Street outlined a proposal for a comprehensive regional security and peace initiative, led by the United States and aimed at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian and broader Israeli-Arab conflicts, while integrating Israel within the region.

The expert discussion began with a keynote address by **former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein**, followed by two policy sessions. The first session focused on Israeli, Palestinian, and American perspectives, featuring guest speakers **Dr. Omer Zanany** of Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, **Omar Dajani** of A Land for All and University of the Pacific, and **Lucy Kurtzer-Ellenbogen** of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). The second session discussed regional and international actors, featuring Ambassador **Hesham Youssef** of USIP and **Celine Touboul** of the Economic Cooperation Foundation.

In the expert discussion, participants agreed that a new approach is needed after the Israel-Hamas war to reach a final resolution of the conflict, the US should use both carrots and sticks to influence the parties, and self-interested leaders and extremists on both sides are playing spoiler to a peace deal. When it came to the questions of how and when to recognize Palestinian statehood, as well as the roles of various actors, such as the United States, Arab states, and Hamas, divergent perspectives were offered without reaching consensus.

The following recommendations are a brief encapsulation of J Street's policy recommendations, first shared at the symposium and subsequently updated and elaborated.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS (IN BRIEF)

1) Secure a stop to the fighting, the release of hostages, a surge in humanitarian aid to Gaza and lay out a comprehensive diplomatic initiative and vision

The most vital first step is to secure an immediate stop to the fighting in Gaza, the release of the remaining hostages and a surge of humanitarian assistance desperately needed by Gaza's civilian population. In parallel to bilateral ceasefire negotiations, or as soon as a pause in the fighting begins, the President should lay out a vision and plan to reach a comprehensive regional security and peace agreement. This initiative should incentivize the parties to participate, offering American recognition of a demilitarized state of Palestine and American help in achieving regional normalization and security for Israel.

2) Ask for parallel, unilateral steps by Israelis and Palestinians and initiate measures to ensure long-term security

The President should ask each side to take a series of immediate, unilateral steps to demonstrate interest in moving forward. Israel should cease actions that undermine the Palestinian Authority and destabilize the West Bank as well as facilitate humanitarian aid to

Gaza and reconstruction efforts after the fighting stops. The PLO/PA should establish a new government or Transitional Authority, commit to and begin implementing necessary reforms, and agree to demilitarization of the future Palestinian state. To encourage these steps, the US should train and build capacity for Palestinian security forces, in a manner compatible with the commitment to demilitarization of the future Palestinian state, and facilitate deployment of a Palestinian security presence in post-war Gaza.

3) Recognize Palestine, reissue the Arab Peace Initiative, facilitate the rebuilding of Gaza, and create a new regional security architecture

The US and partners should recognize the state of Palestine and the President should commit to seeking legislation from Congress addressing existing US restrictions relating to funding the PA and UN bodies after the Palestinians have taken their unilateral steps. Following Israel's unilateral steps, the Arab League should convene to reaffirm the Arab Peace Initiative. The US, EU, G7, and Arab states would commit to partnering in a Marshall Plan-scale investment to redevelop Gaza and the West Bank. A new regional security architecture should be developed encompassing Israel and Palestine as well as neighbors – including Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Gulf states, and other willing partners – with meaningful US and international support.

4) Negotiate on two tracks – Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution and Israel-Saudi normalization

The United States would lead a new UN Security Council resolution laying out parameters for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and confirming the path to admission for Palestine as a full member state. The two tracks of negotiations would move in parallel, toward two agreements between: 1) the states of Israel and Palestine, and 2) Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the US. The former would be guided by UNSC resolution parameters and achieved with active participation and facilitation of the United States and other international actors. The latter would require Israel to confirm its intent to recognize Palestine and negotiate a final status agreement, include Saudi recognition of Israel, and involve certain US bilateral security commitments to both countries.

5) Take Congressional action necessary to enable both sets of agreements and support Palestinian admission to the UN as a member state

With agreements complete on both tracks, President Biden would propose a legislative package to Congress removing prohibitions regarding funding of the United Nations following admission of Palestine as a full member state, diplomatic representation in the US for the PLO or any “constituent group” or “successor” to it, and funding that confers a “direct benefit” to the PA. These legislative changes would allow the United States to support the final step in this process: the admission of Palestine as a full member state in the United Nations.

I. INTRODUCTION



Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein gives his keynote address at the J Street Policy Center Symposium, February 2024

Amid the Israel-Hamas war, the J Street Policy Center held a symposium on the topic of rebuilding Gaza and creating a political horizon for Israel-Palestine. In addition to our focus on prioritizing diplomacy, securing the release of the hostages held in Gaza, and protecting civilian lives including through access to humanitarian assistance, J Street has highlighted the need to identify a path out of the horrific cycle of violence and to a political horizon that can bring peace, self-determination, security, justice, and hope for Israelis and Palestinians. To that end, the J Street Policy Center held a symposium on February 13 that gathered experts to tackle the challenge of charting a way forward out of the war and toward conflict resolution.

In J Street's view, this moment calls for – and indeed, requires – bold US leadership.

At the start of the symposium, President Jeremy Ben-Ami presented J Street's vision for resolute US leadership. He outlined a comprehensive regional security and peace initiative, aimed at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian and broader Israeli-Arab conflicts, integrating Israel within the region.¹ Central to this initiative is an unprecedented offer of American recognition of Palestinian statehood, contingent on a set of criteria that Palestinian representatives must agree to and achieve progress toward. They should be clear, achievable, and designed to provide for Israel's security and deliver freedom, safety, and self-determination to the Palestinian people. Recognizing Palestinian statehood, conditional upon these steps, would bolster moderate Palestinian leadership, disempower Hamas, and reduce the levels of despair and disenfranchisement upon which extremists feed.

¹ "US Recognition of Palestinian Statehood & A Bold Initiative for Comprehensive Regional Peace," J Street Policy Center, February, 2024, <https://jstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/IB-US-RECOGNITION-OF-PALESTINIAN-STATEHOOD-A-BOLD-INITIATIVE-FOR-COMPREHENSIVE-REGIONAL-PEACE-1-1.pdf>.

J Street's comprehensive regional security and peace initiative consists of five steps: 1) secure a stop to the fighting, the release of hostages, a surge in humanitarian aid to Gaza, and lay out a comprehensive diplomatic initiative and vision; 2) ask for parallel, unilateral steps by Israelis and Palestinians; 3) recognize Palestine and reissue the Arab Peace Initiative; 4) negotiate on two tracks, Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution and Israeli-Saudi normalization; and 5) take Congressional actions necessary to enable both sets of agreements and support Palestinian admission to the UN as a member state.

While J Street's proposed initiative served as a point of reference throughout the symposium, the broader questions debated were:

- What should a postwar security plan for Gaza entail? Who should be charged with getting into and administering Gaza?
- What will be required in the massive effort to rebuild the Gaza Strip? What specific commitments should be made to restore civilian life and infrastructure?
- What role should the US government play? Is now the time for US and international recognition of Palestinian statehood, and how should that figure into a broader effort to achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace?
- What is the role for Saudi Arabia, and can Saudi-Israeli normalization be leveraged to convince Israel's public and leadership to agree to a two-state solution? How might US recognition of Palestinian statehood play a positive role?
- What contingency plans should be made in case Hamas retains significant military capabilities or even reasserts administrative authority following an end to the fighting?
- Do Prime Minister Netanyahu and his ultra right-wing government need to be replaced in order to achieve peace? What contingency plans should be made in case they remain in power in Israel following an end to the fighting?

II. SUMMARY OF SYMPOSIUM DISCUSSION

The symposium discussion had two components: a keynote address by former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, followed by two policy sessions featuring guest speakers and participant discussions.

The featured guest speakers included Dr. Omer Zanyan of Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, Omar Dajani of A Land for All (ALFA) and University of the Pacific, Lucy Kurtzer-Ellenbogen of the US Institute of Peace, Ambassador Hesham Youssef of the US Institute of Peace, and Celine Touboul of the Economic Cooperation Foundation. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein presented his vision for the path forward, with the final destination being "a permanent settlement based on two states." The featured speakers then outlined the roles of the various stakeholders that are vital in reaching that final destination. Collectively, the panelists and discussion participants provided expert guidance on how to rebuild Gaza after the Israel-Hamas war on the path towards Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein Remarks

On the primary subject of the symposium, 'A Path Forward,' Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein addressed J Street's proposal for a comprehensive regional security and peace initiative, including American recognition of Palestine. Consistent with J Street's vision, Al Hussein expressed that his "hope lies in there being a sequence of events in Gaza, in the region, and across leading capitals that are coordinated and play off one another. Each step providing a positive energy and momentum to the next step."

Al Hussein noted that any such US-led initiative would need to be a step-by-step "process," adding that it "will need a principal shepherd, a contact group, and a leading coordinator on the ground with a wide remit." He emphasized that this process would "only adjust what it is that the Israelis and the Palestinians alone can decide." While the role of outside actors is "not of marginal significance," according to Al Hussein, it must be shaped by the wants and needs of the local actors. He also stressed that any such process will need a clearly-defined political goal and warned that "the path to rebuilding Gaza and an eventual Israel-Palestine peace is thin and easy to blot out with another shock."

Al Hussein found hope in the UN Security Council's appointment of the "extremely able" Sigrid Kaag to the post of Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator.² He indicated that Kaag could serve as the leading coordinator on the ground in the effort to secure a negotiated ceasefire. Al Hussein emphasized the need for a contact group, composed of the UN, EU, G7 members, Arab states, and led by the US, to move Israelis and Palestinians along the path towards a "a permanent settlement based on two states." He observed that "the contact group is forming loosely, even if it doesn't quite know it yet."

Having noted the pressing need to move toward a resolution that brings peace and security, and the formidable challenges in doing so, Al Hussein emphasized widespread global agreement over the ultimate goal. In his words, "The target in the minds of the majority of people around the world is also clear: a permanent settlement based on two states."

Main Areas of Consensus

Two policy sessions followed Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein's opening remarks: "Israeli, Palestinian, and American Perspectives on the Path Forward" and "Regional and International Actors on the Path Forward." During those discussions, areas of consensus and disagreement emerged among our experts. We will first examine areas of relative agreement among our symposium participants.

² "Ms. Sigrid Kaag of the Netherlands - Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2720 (2023)," *Haaretz*, December 26, 2023, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/personnel-appointments/2023-12-26/ms-sigrid-kaag-of-the-netherlands-senior-humanitarian-and-reconstruction-coordinator-for-gaza-pursuant-security-council-resolution-2720-%282023%29>.

Moving Beyond Conflict Management and Toward Recognition of Palestinian Statehood

The horrific carnage suffered by Israelis and Palestinians since October 7 demonstrated the failure of “managing” or “shrinking the conflict” and the necessity of resolving the underlying conflict³. Participants agreed that the pre-October 7 approach of conflict management not only failed, but bore significant responsibility for producing the tragic events on and following October 7. They agreed that after the Gaza war, a new approach will be absolutely necessary.

Most participants felt that as part of this new approach, US recognition of Palestinian statehood would be helpful, and may even be necessary, in order to convince key Arab states to invest in the rebuilding and stabilization of Gaza. Indeed, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have made clear that they will not commit to such an effort without a clear path to Palestinian statehood.

Ambassador Youssef noted that Saudi Arabia – the regional “crown jewel” – has indicated that it will not establish diplomatic relations with Israel “unless an independent Palestinian state is recognized...on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital and...the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip stops and all of Israeli occupying forces withdraw.” Publicly, Saudi Arabia has confirmed that its potential normalization of relations with Israel is contingent upon recognition of a Palestinian state.⁴



Omar Dajani speaks at the J Street Policy Center Symposium

Dr. Omer Zanany proposed a 3-stage plan to move beyond conflict management: 1) a peace conference in which “all sides will come and and declare their commitments,” followed by 2) an interim phase of 2-3 years that works to create a two-state reality through a “global acknowledgement of the Palestinian Authority,” and then (3) a combination of two negotiating tracks, one a direct Israeli-Palestinian and the other a track between Israel and main regional actors. Omar Dajani went a step further than Dr.

³ Patrick Kingsley, “‘Shrinking the Conflict’: What Does Israel’s New Mantra Really Mean?,” *New York Times*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/30/world/middleeast/israel-bennett-palestinians-shrinking.html>.

⁴ “Saudi Arabia: no Israel ties without recognition of Palestinian state,” *Reuters*, February 7, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-says-there-will-be-no-diplomatic-relations-with-israel-without-an-2024-02-07/#:~:text=The%20Saudi%20foreign%20ministry%20statement,East%20Jerusalem%20as%20its%20capital%22>.

Zanany, emphasizing that it is not enough to talk broadly about Palestinian statehood during an interim phase. Instead, Dajani proposed that it is crucial to concretely lay out what statehood would entail and how it “can transform Palestinian lives, about what kind of borders we are talking about, and also about how we are going to address issues like Jerusalem, settlements, and refugees that have hindered resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the past.”

An Israeli participant added that just as Palestinians need to understand what independent statehood would entail, so too does Israeli society. Specifically, Israeli society “needs to understand how a Palestinian state is not going to threaten our security and our lives” and in fact “enhances Israeli security.” J Street Board Member and Policy Center Advisory Council Member Jon Greenwald offered the US perspective on recognizing Palestinian statehood, arguing that it would demonstrate to the Palestinian Authority that “real benefits for Palestinian national aspirations will follow” recognition of statehood and to the wider Arab world that the “US is serious about a two-state solution.”

Need for the United States to Use Both Sticks and Carrots

Prior US policy of only being ready to recognize Palestinian statehood after not only Israeli-Arab normalization efforts, but concurrent with or after Israeli recognition, has given right-wing Israeli governments a veto over Palestinian statehood⁵. Participants agreed on the need for a new approach that, at the outset of a push to achieve peace, signals clearly that the US and the world are serious in their determination to achieve two states as the



UN Security Council vote on resolution regarding Gaza

end result. That would entail using sticks and leverage, and not just carrots, with the parties involved. In the words of Chair of the J Street Advisory Council Mort Halperin: “The Israeli people have to understand that they can no longer in effect rely on our support regarding our money but especially on our veto at the UN when they simply ignore everything we ask them to do.”⁶

The expert participants largely concurred that US policy in Israel-Palestine has failed to

⁵ Gideon Rachman, “Netanyahu’s master plan for Israel and Palestine has failed,” *Financial Times*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/eaf20221-1074-4bb4-9677-9091a5c31b1e>.

⁶ “Veto of Security Council Resolution Calling for Ceasefire in Gaza Emboldens Israel to Continue Crimes against Palestinian People, Speakers Tell General Assembly,” United Nations, March 5, 2024. <https://press.un.org/en/2024/ga12586.doc.htm-0#:~:text=The%20use%20of%20the%20Security,situation%20in%20the%20enclave%20is>.

achieve outcomes toward conflict resolution and that the US has lost much of its credibility in the region. Halperin advised that the “first step in the process has to be for the US to establish that there are consequences” for Israel, “that starts with saying to the Israeli people you have to produce a government which commits to two states.” Symposium participants discussed the various sticks that the US could use to pressure Israel to take the necessary steps to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including: making it clear that the US will not veto appropriate and constructive resolutions at the UN Security Council, sanctioning West Bank settlers, and implementing guardrails on aid to Israel.

Spoilers and Leadership Challenges on Both Sides

The role played by spoilers and extremists on both sides, and how to address it, was a significant topic of discussion at the symposium. Our participants agreed that Israeli and Palestinian extremist actors, within and outside of leadership, are obstacles on a path forward. Israelis and Palestinians desperately need better leadership, and the consensus among symposium participants was that both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas must step aside.⁷ In addition, Palestinian extremism such as Hamas terror activity and other incitement to violence must also be resolutely countered. At the same time, Israeli extremism such as settler violence, home demolitions, forced evacuations, settlement expansion, and other forms of creeping annexation must be opposed effectively.

Of course, the deleterious impact of spoilers on progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace is not new. A symposium participant opined that “as soon as Rabin was assassinated, Netanyahu won the 1996 election, and Israel no longer had any iota of commitment to the Oslo process.”⁸ To prevent spoilers from undermining a rekindled peace process, guest speaker Omar Dajani suggested that – contrary to the Oslo process – there must be clear agreement on a destination. The Palestinian Authority will need to be empowered over Hamas in order to forge a lasting peace with Israel. Israel, meanwhile, will need to remove from power extremist ministers like Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich.⁹ A symposium participant suggested that the US exert “a little more force,” so as to contend with potential spoilers and “political leadership that is standing in the way.”

Regarding the Palestinian leadership, one symposium participant suggested that Abbas should step aside and become president for life with strictly ceremonial duties and full immunity for himself and his circle. Abbas should then appoint a new prime minister or administrator for Gaza who can be accepted by Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza. The expert participant stressed that a new Palestinian leader must be able to engage with Hamas – mentioning Nasser al-Kidwa,¹⁰ a former foreign minister and former diplomat in the UN, as a potential candidate.¹¹

⁷ Jamie Dettmer, “3 men are holding the Levant hostage,” *Politico*, February 8, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/three-men-are-holding-the-levant-hostage>.



Israeli protestors protest Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

Palestinian protestors protest Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas

Key Areas of Disagreement

Throughout the expert discussion, a few key areas of disagreement emerged. Some of these points were framed in response to J Street’s proposal. Other areas of disagreement debated the roles of various actors, such as the United States, Arab states, and Hamas.

Recognizing the State of Palestine: When and How

As detailed above, there was substantial agreement among our participants regarding US recognition of Palestinian statehood, a step the State Department is reportedly considering for Palestine after the war in Gaza.¹² Similarly, UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron announced that his country has intentions to confirm “commitment to a sovereign, viable Palestinian state...and grant it recognition, including at the United Nations.”¹³ Where participants disagreed was on the questions of when and how to recognize Palestinian statehood – and specifically whether the US should confer

⁸ Rebecca Collard, “Why the Murder of the Israeli Prime Minister Doomed Peace Negotiations,” *Time*, November 4, 2015, <https://time.com/4099762/rabin-murder-doom-peace/>.

⁹ Adam Taylor, “What do Israel’s new far-right kingmakers want?,” *Washington Post*, November 3, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/11/03/israel-far-right-ben-gvir-smotrich/>.

¹⁰ Khaled Yacoub Oweis and Tommy Hilton, “Who are the front runners to replace Mahmoud Abbas as Palestine’s next leader?,” *National*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/palestine-israel/2024/01/25/mahmoud-abbas-palestine-leader-who/>.

¹¹ Qais Abu Samra, “Who is Fatah’s dismissed member Nasser al-Qudwa?,” Anadolu Agency, December 3, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/life/profile-who-is-fatahs-dismissed-member-nasser-al-qudwa/2173529>.

¹² Barak Ravid, State Department reviewing options for possible recognition of Palestinian, *Axios*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/2024/01/31/palestine-statehood-biden-israel-gaza-war>.

¹³ David Cameron, “We all abhor unpleasant deals, but that’s what must happen if we are to solve the Gaza crisis: article by the Foreign Secretary,” Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, January 28, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/we-all-abhor-unpleasant-deals-but-thats-what-must-happen-if-we-are-to-solve-the-gaza-crisis-article-by-the-foreign-secretary>.

recognition immediately or make the move contingent on steps to be taken by the Palestinian leadership. Many participants framed their remarks in support of or opposition to J Street's position on the timing and approach toward recognition of Palestine, which would be conditioned on credible Palestinian commitment to, and progress toward, instituting reforms. Omer Zanany of Mitvim laid out a similar framing, with conditions including a new Palestinian government, security guarantees for Israel, and the process toward a normalization deal with Saudi Arabia.



UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron

Some participants disagreed with this framing, arguing that any delay due to conditions for recognition would be detrimental. Some of the experts said that the “frontloading” of recognition would avoid the open-endedness that complicated the Oslo process, instead allowing the final status negotiations to be between official, elected state governments. They argued that recognition would ease the negotiation process, as the parties would be independent, representative governments bound by international law. Some Palestinian experts also emphasized that Palestine should not have to earn statehood, and that we must get out of the mindset that there are scorecards that Palestinians have to pass, criticizing the discussion as reminiscent of an “Oslo 2.0.” Some participants voiced concern that any delay or conditions for recognition would give room for potential spoilers and fall victim to similar pitfalls as the Oslo process.

More generally, the flawed Oslo process loomed large over the discussion, as participants argued how to best learn from it so as to avoid making similar mistakes. Some experts discussed the path forward in familiar, multi-year phased plans and reminded the group that the process is not starting from scratch. However, many experts criticized the incremental approach and called for bigger, bolder steps, especially from the United States. Some went further, calling for more force from the US with clear red lines and consequences for Israel. Participants also criticized Oslo for leaving the negotiations open-ended, though people disagreed if the shortcomings were due to either a lack of vision, or a process that was flawed due to lack of commitment and democratic input that allowed for spoilers on both sides.

The Question of American Leadership

While there was a broad understanding that the United States will have a major role in the path forward, some called US leadership “indispensable,” while others emphasized past US



US President Joe Biden

failures and complications resulting from US electoral politics. J Street based its proposal on a US-led plan to be introduced by President Biden due to his unique credibility and influence. Some of the symposium's featured speakers similarly highlighted the importance of the United States to lead the diplomatic process, with Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein deeming America the "principal shepherd" and Ambassador Hesham Youssef calling the US the "only power capable of achieving significant results." Some experts offered prescriptions for more

successful US leadership, through setting clear expectations, monitoring, and pressuring the parties; others argued that the US should lead a multinational coalition and coordinate efforts on the ground.

Various participants raised doubts about the ability of the United States to successfully play this critical role, citing the historic failure of the US on this file and a concern that American politics will limit the ability to hold the parties accountable. Some participants argued that the US has lost credibility due to the inability to influence the Israeli government during the current war in Gaza.¹⁴ Multiple experts emphasized the urgency of action due to the short timeline of the upcoming presidential election – and also voiced concern over the potential change in the American administration. They pointed out that Donald Trump has a much closer relationship with Benjamin Netanyahu and – as shown by his approach to the conflict during his presidency – is highly likely to undo any progress made by President Biden toward a comprehensive solution.¹⁵

Normalization and the Role of Regional Actors

Participants disagreed on how the role of regional actors and normalization might help or hurt the process of reaching a peace agreement. Some experts pointed out the unique potential of various Arab countries on the path forward. Ambassador Hesham Youssef, as a former Egyptian diplomat, explained that "critical neighbors" like Egypt and Jordan have a vested interest in stability and advancing peace. He also noted that "new normalizers" like UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco will not be able to continue to advance their relationships

¹⁴ Yasmeen Serhan, "What Gaza Reveals About the Limits of American Power, *Time*, February 16, 2024, <https://time.com/6696023/biden-gaza-israel-us/>.

¹⁵ Ron Kampeas, "What would Donald do? Here's what we know about how Trump would handle Israel and Gaza," *Times of Israel*, March 2, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/what-would-donald-do-heres-what-we-know-about-how-trump-would-handle-israel-and-gaza/>.

with Israel without advancement of peace prospects. Some participants, however, emphasized that public opinion in the region is extremely hostile to Israel, which could constrain the actions of even autocratic governments. While J Street and others emphasized the unique potential for a comprehensive regional peace to galvanize Israeli, Palestinian, and broader regional support in favor of a conflict-ending resolution, others voiced concerns. One participant expressed discomfort that normalization with Saudi Arabia would require a defense guarantee from the United States, which could in turn provoke Iran and further destabilize the region.¹⁶ Others focused on the potential for Hizballah, the Houthis, and other Iranian proxies in the region to escalate the violence.



Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken meets with Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

The Future of Hamas and Other Islamists in Palestinian Politics

Hamas and its role in the post-war reality was debated throughout the symposium discussions. Omar Dajani introduced the topic, arguing that it is a “very difficult pill for folks to swallow,” but Islamist politics and a movement connected to Hamas will have a role in the future of Palestinian politics. Crucially, he said, we need to “create a framework that ensures that spoilers are not once again able to undermine each stage of the path that we’re headed towards.” J Street’s proposal included a caveat on this point, with a position that Hamas leadership and those responsible for the October 7 massacre would not be part of any Transitional Authority, “which must affirm its commitment to building a demilitarized state that will fight terror, recognize Israel and commit to nonviolence.”¹⁷ Some participants pushed back, raising doubts that Hamas would ever make these commitments or have any incentive to do so given their increased popularity in the West Bank. Other experts argued that Hamas as a grassroots movement is not going to disappear from Palestinian society, and that any future leader of the Palestinian government must be capable of communicating with the group. Celine Toubul agreed that some semblance of Hamas will remain, but “to address this challenge, there will be a need for an international force” to bolster other Palestinian groups. Many participants agreed that, though flawed and unpopular, empowering the Palestinian Authority was the best means to counter the influence of Hamas.

¹⁶ David Ottaway, “Should the United States Provide Saudi Arabia a Security Guarantee?,” Wilson Center, September 25, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/should-united-states-provide-saudi-arabia-security-guarantee>.

¹⁷ “A Bold Initiative for Comprehensive Regional Security and Peace - Grounded in US Recognition of Palestine,” J Street Policy Center, March 5, 2024, <https://jstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IB-A-BOLD-INITIATIVE-FOR-COMPREHENSIVE-REGIONAL-SECURITY-AND-PEACE-GROUNDED-IN-US-RECOGNITION-OF-PALESTINE.pdf>.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

At the outset of the symposium, J Street presented its proposal for a comprehensive regional security and peace initiative. The following is an update and elaboration of our proposal, informed by the symposium discussion and additional analysis from outside experts.

The Biden Administration should chart and boldly lay out a clear path out of the horrors of the current war and the underlying conflict. We recommend that it do so in the five steps below. All aspects of this plan should be grounded in the end goal of providing security, dignity, and self-determination to both Israelis and Palestinians.

Step One: Secure a stop to the fighting, the release of hostages, a surge in humanitarian aid to Gaza – and lay out a comprehensive diplomatic initiative and vision

The most vital first step is to secure an immediate stop to the fighting in Gaza, the release of the remaining hostages, and a surge of humanitarian assistance desperately needed by Gaza’s civilian population. The Biden Administration is actively engaged in the tough diplomacy necessary to achieve such an agreement. Given the unimaginable scale and extent of the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza¹⁸ and the difficulty of achieving a negotiated ceasefire, the Administration must meanwhile do everything in its power to facilitate a sustained surge of humanitarian aid into Gaza,¹⁹ including through enforcing applicable US law.²⁰

In parallel to bilateral ceasefire negotiations – or as soon as a pause in the fighting begins – we recommend a major presidential speech laying out a bold vision for the post-conflict future and a comprehensive regional diplomatic initiative to realize it. To be heard by the traumatized people at



Palestinian families gather to receive humanitarian aid

¹⁸ “Famine Review Committee: Gaza Strip,” Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, March 2024, https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Committee_Review_Report_Gaza_Strip_Acute_Food_Insecurity_Feb_July2024_Special_Brief.pdf.

¹⁹ “Catastrophe in Gaza: Recommendations to Increase the Delivery of Humanitarian Aid,” J Street Policy Center, January 31, 2024, <https://jstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ISSUE-BRIEF-CATASTROPHE-IN-GAZA-RECOMMENDATIONS-TO-INCREASE-THE-DELIVERY-OF-HUMANITARIAN-AI.pdf>.

²⁰ “National Security Memorandum 20 & Section 620i Of The Foreign Assistance Act: Requirements, Process, And Enforcement,” J Street Policy Center, March 14, 2024, <https://jstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/NSM-Memo.pdf>.

the center of this conflict, the initiative has to be rooted in promises of security and acceptance for Israelis and security, freedom, and self-determination for Palestinians. The speech should offer American recognition of a demilitarized state of Palestine as a key incentive for Palestinian participation and offer American help in achieving regional normalization and security as a key incentive for Israeli participation.

Step Two: Ask for parallel, unilateral steps by Israelis and Palestinians, and initiate measures to ensure long-term security

The President should ask each side to take a series of immediate, unilateral steps to demonstrate their interest in moving forward.

Israel should take the following steps:

- *Cease actions that undermine the Palestinian Authority and destabilize the West Bank:* The list includes ending efforts to weaken the Palestinian economy by releasing customs revenues to the Palestinian Authority and reactivating permits for Palestinian workers from the West Bank to enter Israel. It also requires ending home demolitions and stopping settlement expansion in Area C, while limiting military operations in Area A, such as cities in the northern West Bank and refugee camps ostensibly under PA control. Israel must crack down on settler violence and displacement of Palestinians, and ensure that violent settlers are not aided and abetted by security forces. In order to take steps to end the occupation of the West Bank, Israel should incrementally change the status of some land in Area C to B, and B to A, and begin evacuating illegal settlement outposts.
- *Facilitate humanitarian aid to Gaza and reconstruction efforts after the war:* Israel must restore adequate electricity, fuel, and water into the Strip; open additional

crossings and expand hours of operation; clarify and ease policies banning goods; allow the entry of additional commercial goods; permit the use of the Israeli port of Ashdod for aid deliveries; and work collaboratively with the UN and aid agencies as they scale up operations, including through the implementation of a civil-military deconfliction mechanism.²¹ Following the war, Israel must also commit to allowing the rebuilding of Gaza – unlike after previous wars, when Israel’s blockade of the Strip prevented adequate reconstruction.²²



Man in Gaza receives food supplies from UNRWA

The PLO/PA should in parallel take the following steps:

- *Establish a new government or Transitional Authority:* In consultation with all Palestinian factions,²³ new government ministers should be appointed to serve alongside newly appointed Prime Minister Mohammad Mustafa for an interim period, until elections are held. Appointments of public positions and promotions should be awarded not on the level of loyalty to the leadership, but on the basis of performance or professional merit.²⁴ This nonpartisan leadership should set a benchmark for legislative and presidential elections. The leadership of Hamas and anyone involved in planning or executing the October 7 massacre can have no role in this new Transitional Authority, which must affirm its commitment to building a demilitarized state that will fight terror, recognize Israel, and commit to nonviolence.
- *Commit to and begin implementing reforms:* The revitalized PA should agree to, and the Transitional Authority should start implementing, a series of reforms – including in the areas of democracy and governance, finance, judiciary, combating corruption, overhauling the prisoner payment program, education, and incitement. To combat corruption, ensure transparency, and accountability, the PA should work towards the establishment of an independent parliament and judiciary with effective anti-corruption laws.²⁵ The PA should also work to end state harassment of Palestinian civil society and media.²⁶ Such reforms would help realize the vision to “promote a culture of partnership, dialogue, transparency, inclusiveness, and participation in decision-making among all components of society, ensuring public and private freedoms in accordance with the law, most notably freedom of opinion and expression.”²⁷



Palestinian employees of the Central Elections Committee

²¹ J Street Policy Center, “Catastrophe in Gaza.” <https://jstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ISSUE-BRIEF-CATASTROPHE-IN-GAZA-RECOMMENDATIONS-TO-INCREASE-THE-DELIVERY-OF-HUMANITARIAN-AI.pdf>.

²² Sultan Barakat and Firas Masri, “Still in ruins: Reviving the stalled reconstruction of Gaza,” Brookings, August 22, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/reviving-the-stalled-reconstruction-of-gaza/>.

²³ Salam Fayyad, “How the War in Gaza Is Reshaping the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” Foreign Affairs, December 21, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/podcasts/how-war-gaza-reshaping-israeli-palestinian-conflict>.

²⁴ Marwa Fatafta, “Neopatrimonialism, Corruption, and the Palestinian Authority: Pathways to Real Reform,” Al-Shabaka, December 20, 2018, <https://al-shabaka.org/circles/neopatrimonialism-corruption-and-the-palestinian-authority-pathways-to-real-reform/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

- *Agree to demilitarization of future Palestinian state:* The PA should commit to long-term maintenance of demilitarization in the state of Palestine, including preventing foreign militaries or armed groups from establishing themselves within Palestine and Palestinian forces operating outside the state,²⁸ as well as to foregoing heavy weaponry (only weapons for internal security/policing), military, or military infrastructure.²⁹ The PA should agree to the presence of a third-party verification mechanism to ensure that standards of demilitarization are being upheld.³⁰

The US should take actions to ensure the safety of Israelis and Palestinians:



Palestinian police officers in Ramallah

- *Train and build capacity for Palestinian security forces:* While the Transitional Authority builds toward a demilitarized state, the US should train and build capable Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF), under the auspices of the United States Security Coordinator (USSC) as it has for nearly two decades. The PASF should ensure the new state's internal security and cooperate with neighboring states, including Israel, in combating terror, and the US should commit to working with it to develop a strong internal police, border guards,

and counterterrorism and other security forces. The PA and Israel should reiterate their agreements on intelligence-sharing and security cooperation.³¹

- *Facilitate deployment of a Palestinian security presence in post-war Gaza:* As the PASF will not be able to step in immediately to secure Gaza, the US should support the gradual deployment of: 1) unarmed PA civil defense forces to aid in disaster response and reconstruction, and 2) Palestinian border and customs police. For a limited time, Palestinian forces should be supported by a US-incentivized international peace-keeping contingent, including Egyptian, Jordanian, and other Arab forces. The Administration and Congress should ensure that the USSC has sufficient resources to support this process and consider placing USSC teams in the Strip as peace monitors alongside an international force, to reassure Israeli and international partners.³²

²⁷ "President Abbas asks Dr. Mohammad Mustafa to form 19th Palestinian government," Wafa, March 14, 2024, <https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/142480>.

²⁸ Aharon Ze'evi Farkash, "Key Principles of a Demilitarized Palestinian State," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, June 1, 2024, https://jcpa.org/requirements-for-defensible-borders/demilitarized_palestinian_state/.

²⁹ David Makovsky, "Without Enforcement, Talk of Two States Is Hollow," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 16, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/without-enforcement-talk-two-states-hollow>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Michael Koplou and Shira Efron, "Starting From the Ground Up: U.S. Policy Options for Post-Hamas Gaza," Israel Policy Forum, December 7, 2023, <https://israelpolicyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Starting-From-the-Ground-Up-1.pdf>.

Step Three: Recognize Palestine and reissue the Arab Peace Initiative

In return for each side taking the unilateral steps outlined, the President should propose that:

- The United States and other partners – including European countries and other US allies that do not yet recognize Palestinian statehood – recognize the state of Palestine after the Palestinians have taken the unilateral steps asked of them. The President should also commit to seeking legislation from Congress that would address existing US restrictions relating to funding the PA and UN bodies, a necessary step for the US to support admission of Palestine to the UN, upon completion of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.
- The Arab League convene to reaffirm the Arab Peace Initiative after the specified steps have been taken by Israel and it has committed to entering negotiations over final status issues based on clear terms of reference.
- Leading Arab countries, the G7, and the EU, commit to participate along with the US in Marshall Plan-scale investment in redevelopment of Gaza and the West Bank through the new Transitional Palestinian Authority referenced above, with reconstruction and security overseen in partnership with Arab countries. This partnership would facilitate the immediate repair and reconstruction of utilities and other public works, as well as identify major projects, raise funds for them, and execute major project development. Saudi participation in the repair and reconstruction effort is key for the plan’s overall success and can be framed as part of a commitment to reopening a path to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.³³
- A new regional security architecture will be developed encompassing Israel and Palestine as well as neighbors – including Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Gulf states, and other willing partners – with meaningful American involvement and international support. This regional security architecture should be subject to the implementation of agreed security arrangements. This will greatly enhance security for Israelis and also for Palestinians – as the state of Palestine should receive meaningful guarantees regarding



Flags of the Arab League

³³Robert Satloff, Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, “Israel’s War Aims and the Principles of a Post-Hamas Administration in Gaza,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 17, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-war-aims-and-principles-post-hamas-administration-gaza>.

sovereignty over its own territory.³⁴ Following a future peace settlement and subject to agreement by Israel and Palestine, the US should consider the possibility of a US-led international peace-enabling force deployed along the Palestinian borders with Egypt, Jordan, and Israel, and along potential borders in Jerusalem.³⁵

Step Four: Negotiate on two tracks – Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution and Israel-Saudi normalization

The President should propose that following US recognition of Palestine and the reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative, the United States would lead a new UN Security Council resolution laying out the parameters for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and confirming the path to admission for Palestine as a full member state. The new resolution could be framed as an update to UN Security Council Resolution 242,³⁶ and would enshrine the US and international community's commitment to the two-state solution in international law, while setting out parameters for resolving final-status issues.

Negotiations should be proposed on two tracks, toward two agreements between:

- The states of Israel and Palestine, guided by parameters laid out in the UNSC resolution on final status issues, with the active participation and facilitation of the United States and other international actors.
- Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States in which the US would make certain bilateral security commitments to both countries, Israel would confirm its intent to recognize Palestine and negotiate a final status agreement, and Saudi Arabia would recognize Israel. The US should reiterate its commitment to supporting Israel's defensive military capabilities and qualitative military edge, and to enhancing efforts to combat Iranian moves to destabilize the region, including Tehran's financing of terrorism and regional proxies.³⁷

The two tracks would move in parallel, and necessary US legislation to facilitate these agreements would be pursued as a package, hopefully attracting wide bipartisan support.

³⁴ Yezid Sayigh, "Redefining the Basics: Sovereignty and Security of the Palestinian State," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 1995, <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/40150>.

³⁵ Robert E. Hunter and Seth G. Jones, *Building a Successful Palestinian State*, Rand Corporation, 2006, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG146.2.sum.pdf.

³⁶ Martin Indyk, "The Strange Resurrection of the Two-State Solution How an Unimaginable War Could Bring About the Only Imaginable Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/palestine-strange-resurrection-two-state-solution-indyk>.

³⁷ "Starting From the Ground Up: U.S. Policy Options for Post-Hamas Gaza," *Israel Policy Forum*, <https://israelpolicyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Starting-From-the-Ground-Up-1.pdf>.

Step Five: Take Congressional action necessary to enable both sets of agreements and support Palestinian admission to the UN as a member state

Finally, when agreements are complete on both tracks, the President would bring to Congress the necessary legislation to facilitate both the Israeli-Palestinian peace and Saudi normalization agreements. The legislative package would include the removal of prohibitions regarding: US funding of the United Nations, its specialized agencies, and affiliated organizations following the admission of Palestine as a full member state; diplomatic representation in the US for the PLO or any “constituent group” or “successor” to it; and funding that confers a “direct benefit” to the PA.

These legislative changes would allow the United States to support the final step in this process: the admission of Palestine as a full member state in the United Nations.



Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas speaking at the United Nations

IV. CONCLUSION

As the Israel-Hamas war rages on, the humanitarian situation in Gaza is deteriorating into unimaginable devastation, the West Bank is on the brink of eruption, and Israeli society is traumatized and fractured. Amid this chaos, the J Street Policy Center's symposium in February brought together some of the leading experts based in Washington, DC and from Israel, Palestine, and the broader region to discuss a path forward from the war. The convening of these policy experts revealed several key themes that are framing the global conversation on rebuilding Gaza and creating a political horizon for Israel-Palestine.

1. The current crisis, catastrophic as it is, has opened a must-seize window of opportunity for changing an unacceptable status quo in Israel-Palestine.
2. The question of leadership is clearly on everyone's mind, with the US playing a key role but plagued by political limitations, the futures of longtime leaders Netanyahu and Abbas undetermined, and a desperate need for constructive Israeli and Palestinian leaders.
3. The actors are numerous, with extremists playing spoiler on both sides, and partners in the region and internationally offering a unique opportunity for a comprehensive regional agreement.
4. The diplomatic process is key, both in the short term end of hostilities and the long term negotiations that must learn from past mistakes.

Only a comprehensive political solution that can ensure security, peace, and hope for all can end the cycle of violence, and for the first time in years, the international community is focused on the issue and clearly understands the stakes involved. Experts have laid out the steps to reach a sustainable peace agreement and ensure security for Israelis and Palestinians. The most important element that remains is the political will to make it a reality.

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