

Despite despair, a regional way forward for Middle East Peace

By Gilead Sher and Dan Perry

With Israelis still off balance over the Oct. 7 Hamas massacre, and as Gaza lies in ruins with its terrorist overlords clinging to Israeli hostages, it's easy to despair about the Middle East. Yet beyond the headlines lie some reasons to be hopeful, amid significant movement behind the scenes.

Even though people are radicalized right now, the tragedy is so great that there is also an understanding that things cannot continue as they have been. We'd like to share a framework constructed in recent weeks by a group of experts, both from Israel and from the Palestinian side, with participation of Western parties, most but not all former officials, and some but not all veterans of past peace efforts. For now, to avoid harming a very delicate process, their identities must remain confidential.

This proposal is not another think-tank exercise but rather one that we believe will soon be formally adopted, in one way or another, and we assess that it will be acceptable to the Israeli government that follows Netanyahu's odious assemblage, which is on life-support. It aligns with groundwork already being done by the Americans and Europeans among key regional stakeholders. It is currently being examined by European governments and on Capitol Hill and will soon be presented to senior officials at the White House.

That is the context in which one should understand reports about US officials planning for "the day after Netanyahu." They should, because he is fatally compromised by the Oct. 7 debacle, his past year's failed bid to Putinize the country, and his dependence on fanatical extremists; he is currently an obstruction, but he is not long for power.

Chiefly, the reason for prudent optimism lies with the moderate Arab countries that are key to breaking the logjam in Israeli-Palestinian thinking. That is because there is an emerging consensus in ruling circles in the Sunni Arab world that the future lies in building a common geopolitical structure with Israel.

Though this has been building for years, the ruinous war launched by Hamas on Oct. 7 has focused minds. While Saudi Arabia did not join the 2020 Abraham Accords, maintaining its demand for the creation of a Palestinian state first, there are indications this position has shifted. Under the proposed framework, Saudi Arabia and other holdout countries would become full partners and agree to normalize relations with Israel upfront. In exchange, Israel would agree upfront to recognize in principle a demilitarized Palestine, whose borders would constitute an area equivalent in size to the West Bank and Gaza.

Of course, Israelis are jittery about handing over territory, after their worst fears were realized in Gaza. Israel pulled out in 2005, removing all settlers and soldiers. The result was a takeover by violent jihadis. Zionists should yearn for a partition, because otherwise Israel will lose its Jewish majority – but there are real security concerns.

This is why the proposal does not call for an immediate pullout but a phased one, and it stipulates that the Palestinian state will be fully demilitarized and will not have rogue militias, and that this security arrangement will be overseen for a time by outside powers, including an Arab force.

The framework lays out three bedrock principles: starting with mutual recognition of Israel and Palestine; involve regional and international actors in key aspects of the agreement to incentivize, ensure accountability, and facilitate implementation; frontloading the process to seize the momentum created by the current crisis, while taking into consideration the need for phased – though enforceable - implementation.

Importantly, the framework also makes provisions to allow some settlers living far from the pre-1967 borders to remain in Palestine if they so wish – *under Palestinian sovereignty*. The pre-requisite for an end to Palestinian terrorism and militias is also key: Israel will not have paid the price of Oct. 7 in vain. It will also no longer feel alone in dealing with the potential danger from the Palestinian areas; its interests will be, at last, aligned with those of the moderate Arab world.

On Jerusalem, at an advanced stage of the process, the proposal calls for a special regime in the Old City – the nut past efforts found the hardest to crack because of the primary holy sites there. But the Old City will remain contiguous with Israel and accessible to all believers of all faiths.

The nascent Palestinian state will have to develop and reform its institutions over a transitional period of up to five years. This will supersede and absorb other Palestinian entities such as the Palestinian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization. Capitalizing on the extensive Arab involvement (Egypt, Qatar) in the current crisis, an efficient international-regional mechanism of monitoring and implementation would be established to oversee steps toward a two-state reality and normalization between Israel and additional Arab states.

The framework introduces a coalition, led by the United States and the European Union, in collaboration with Israel, the Palestinians and Arab partners.

Critically, the plan addresses the specific challenges in Gaza, proposing a detailed reconstruction and redevelopment plan including a dedicated regional and international fund.

In the broader sense, the European Union and the United States would lead regional and international economic initiatives, anchoring the peace process in tangible prosperity and stability.

The framework envisions talks aimed at ending the suffering of Palestinian refugees on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative. And no less important, the talks will also address compensation for Jewish immigrants who were forced to leave their homes and property in Arab countries after 1948 – which has been a sore point in Israel for generations.

Ensuring the implementation of this ambitious framework necessitates a sophisticated monitoring and implementation mechanism led by the US and EU, making decisions based on agreed benchmarks.

It is clear that this will require the replacement of the ultranationalist coalition in Israel. All polls show the opposition winning a new election – but first the coalition must collapse in parliament. That should be hastened by global adoption of a concrete plan to end the war and begin the peace.

The cliché about things being the darkest before the dawn sometimes actually applies. The current crisis, with hundreds of thousands displaced on both sides, with many thousands dead and with trust in ashes, is as dark as things have been. That is a moment that can focus the mind. It screams out for a new dawn. The region and the world cannot afford inaction.

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