

# The Road to Peace in Gaza:

## A Veteran Negotiator's Plan

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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**For opportunity to emerge from tragedy, two bridges must be built: one leading from the current situation to the “day after” the war, and a second creating a viable path to a Palestinian state.**

**F**or more than 30 years I have worked to try to make peace between Arabs and Israelis, serving under five different presidents. I have seen highs, partial agreements and even a near agreement in 2000, when the “Clinton parameters” were accepted by the Israeli government and the Palestinian negotiating delegation, but not by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. I have seen lows: the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Hamas suicide bombings of cafés, buses and discos that were timed to derail progress that we were making.

But none of the lows produced a reality that is as grim as today. For Israelis, October 7 is a trauma that will take years to recover from; the shattering of their security, combined with the fear that what Hamas did is what Palestinians support and would repeat if they had the chance, inevitably makes them reluctant to contemplate the risks required for peace-making. Consumed with their own sense of loss, Israelis seem largely unaware of the Palestinian losses in Gaza—or simply unable even to think about them.

For Palestinians, the death and destruction of recent months has created collective trauma. Palestinians see the Israelis inflicting huge casualties with seemingly little concern for the pain caused. They see the Israelis dehumanising them and rationalising the ferocity of their military onslaught with the need to “defeat Hamas.”

These two societies are both utterly absorbed in their own trauma. This hardly seems like the time, then, to talk about producing two states for two peoples and ending the conflict. Neither can imagine concessions to the other.

And yet there may be an opportunity emerging from the tragedy. From my conversations with senior officials in

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, it is clear to me that there is a readiness on their part to play a role in Gaza and even the West Bank that they have never been prepared to play before, provided it is tied to a political horizon or endpoint—and that the endpoint is two states. Biden administration officials, flying busily around the Middle East, share that glimmer of hope.

If the Gulf powers can be convinced there is a plan that will assure that outcome, they will help build the bridge in Gaza and the West Bank to that future and—in the Saudi case—make peace with Israel. But they don't want to invest in another partial process that leads nowhere or repeats the events that have transpired since the Oslo process of the 1990s broke down.

## Two Bridges to Peace

Is there a way to reconcile all these conflicting mindsets? Not easily. In effect, two bridges have to be built: one to get us from where we are in Gaza to a day-after reality, and the other to make it possible to address the issue of Palestinian statehood in a way that meets Arab needs and enhances, rather than shrinks, Israel's sense of security.

Bridge number one means changing the reality in Gaza, even before the war ends. Without giving up the objective of saving the hostages, on which a deal will have to be done, Israel would shift its focus from elimination of Hamas, which reflects an Islamist idea deeply embedded in the minds of many Palestinians, to the demilitarisation of Gaza—meaning the dismantling of its military infrastructure and capacity.

In turn, the international community could commit to ensuring that Gaza will remain demilitarised. This would require a mechanism to monitor the delivery of all material coming into Gaza, account for where it was stored and see that it went for its intended purpose—not for building tunnels or armaments. If the assistance did not go to the agreed projects, the assistance would stop. In other words, the U.S., working with the Saudis, Emiratis, Egyptians, Europeans and Japanese, would agree that any approach to reconstruction must ensure that Gaza cannot be remilitarised.

In an ideal world, building blocks for the future would be established over the next 12 to 18 months. For example, Hamas, having lost its military formations, command and control, and arms industry, will find it difficult to control Gaza, especially if no major investment in Gaza is forthcoming. Because a vacuum cannot be left, there is a need for an interim administration. Until the Palestinian Authority (PA) is reformed, capable of decent governance and led by an empowered prime minister not tainted by association with its corruption, the PA cannot govern in Gaza. However, the aim should be that it reforms, comes back to Gaza and politically reunifies it with the West Bank.

To manage the urgent issues of water, electricity and health, an international humanitarian mechanism could be established to work with Palestinian businesspeople and the bureaucratic structure that has existed in Gaza since the PA's time, and functioned even under Hamas. This mechanism could address pressing needs including shelter (caravans, trailers, pre-fab housing) for the more than one million Palestinians who evacuated from the north of Gaza to the south and should be allowed to return. The aim would be to restore some of the functions of everyday life in parts of Gaza where Hamas has lost control and, in so doing, demonstrate that life can get better with Hamas out of power.

## No Back Door for Hamas

A major hurdle to any lasting solution is that many Israelis are convinced that any Palestinian state would be run by Hamas or Hamas-like rejectionists. It is essential that talk of a new and reformed PA does not provide a back door for Hamas entryism. Once on the inside, this organisation's militarism and single-minded sense of mission will be geared to a takeover. Not only would that be a boon for Iran's "axis of resistance," but it would contradict the goal of two states: Hamas rejects Israel's existence and the very idea of two states. Preventing Hamas' inclusion must be

part of building the second bridge—one that creates a viable path to a Palestinian state, bringing the Gulf powers to the table, without provoking Israeli fears of what that state might look like.

## Recognising Palestine

**W**ould recognising a Palestinian state before its borders are defined help to provide such a bridge? The U.S. State Department and Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton, the British foreign secretary, are both talking seriously about making such a move.

Getting the Israelis on board will not be easy. At the end of Camp David in the summer of 2000, when I was trying to salvage the summit, I proposed to Ehud Barak, then the Israeli prime minister, that we recognise a Palestinian state but require its attributes (sovereignty and borders) to be negotiated later. He rejected the idea, arguing that Palestinians would adopt maximal positions, and the international community would inevitably drift to the default position of accepting a return to the lines of June 4, 1967, which would leave Israel too strategically vulnerable and did not make provision for Israeli settlement blocs in the West Bank.

Barak's concerns were legitimate. Thus, if the U.S. decides that recognition of Palestinian statehood can be a bridge to a better future—showing both Saudi Arabia and the Palestinians that their national aspirations will be seriously addressed—this recognition would need to be qualified to address Israeli fears.

## Palestinian Preconditions

**S**quaring this circle may not be as daunting as it seems, because in truth, the qualifications or conditions for a Palestinian state should be self-evident:

- A Palestinian state cannot be led by those who reject Israel's existence and a two-state reality;
- Its attributes of sovereignty must be consistent with Israeli security needs, requiring that the state, at a minimum, be demilitarised and not permitted to form alliances with those hostile to Israel;
- Its leaders need to accept Israel's legitimacy (not just its de facto existence) as a way of discrediting those who continue to reject Israel and carry out terror against it;
- It cannot go about inciting violence against Israel and socialising hatred against it, which regrettably has consistently been true of the PA;
- It needs credible institutions and demonstrated governance to ensure it will not be a failed state;
- Finally, it must be able to condemn Hamas' actions and acts of terrorism explicitly, otherwise its failure to do so may be interpreted as support for those actions.

## Israel's Obligations

**T**he onus for action cannot be exclusively on Palestinians. Israel would need to recognise Palestinian national aspirations and—with the right assurances in place—accept Palestinian statehood. In the present climate, this will take some persuasion.

Moreover, Israel should encourage a reforming PA, allowing Palestinian workers back into the country, easing movement of people and goods, and even opening Israel's market to Palestinian products. All of this would improve the PA's economic performance and show that reform can bring rewards.

Israel would need to stop settlement activity outside the pre-existing blocs, as such activity is designed to prevent a Palestinian state. It would also need to crack down on extremist settlers who threaten Palestinians and deny them security. Are any of these steps possible in a government that includes the hardline cabinet ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich? No, because they would not remain in a government that took such actions.

Neither of these bridges would be easy to construct, but if the calamity of October 7 and its aftermath should produce anything, it is a recognition that a different future for Israelis and Palestinians is necessary for both. Acting as if the status quo pre–October 7 can continue would surely guarantee a perpetuation of the conflict. Building these two bridges can give countries in the Middle East a future of prosperity and possibility—and in time may even be able to restore a sense of hope for Israelis and Palestinians.

*Dennis Ross, the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, has served as a lead negotiator and diplomat in Democratic and Republican administrations. This article was originally published on [the Times website \(https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/israel-gaza-war-middle-east-peace-deal-oslo-accords-wn5h57bdz\)](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/israel-gaza-war-middle-east-peace-deal-oslo-accords-wn5h57bdz).* ♦

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