

# From War to Peace? Trip Report from a Middle East Study Tour

by [Cory Gardner \(/experts/cory-gardner\)](#), [Howard Berman \(/experts/howard-berman\)](#), [Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](#), [Ghaith al-Omari \(/experts/ghaith-al-omari\)](#), [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Cory Gardner \(/experts/cory-gardner\)](#)

Cory Gardner is a former Republican senator from Colorado.



[Howard Berman \(/experts/howard-berman\)](#)

Howard Berman is former Democratic congressman from California.



[Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](#)

Dana Stroul is Director of Research and Shelly and Michael Kassen Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



[Ghaith al-Omari \(/experts/ghaith-al-omari\)](#)

Ghaith al-Omari is the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Irwin Levy Family Program on the U.S.-Israel Strategic Relationship.



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

Michael Singh is the Managing Director and Lane-Swig Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute.



## Former legislators and administration officials discuss their findings from a recent group trip to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and the PA.

**O**n February 22, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with members of a delegation sent to the Middle East to assess the prospects for security and peace in the current environment. The event included former U.S. senator Cory Gardner (R-CO), former U.S. congressman Howard Berman (D-CA), and Institute senior fellows Ghaith al-Omari, Michael Singh, and Dana Stroul, who recently completed service as the Pentagon's top civilian official on Middle East issues. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; a presentation by Institute executive director Robert Satloff was published separately.

[Read a transcript of Dr. Satloff's remarks. \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/war-peace-middle-east-observations-regional-tour\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/war-peace-middle-east-observations-regional-tour)

### Cory Gardner

**F**or many years, the United States has been refocusing its foreign policy toward the Asia-Pacific region. In light of the current situation in the Middle East, however, many are wondering if Washington has pivoted too far.

There is no magic solution to this crisis, and the viewpoints of the capitals we visited during our regional tour remain at odds. While those outside Israel demand a "ceasefire now," perhaps followed by a burst of peace diplomacy, those inside Israel intend to follow through with dismantling Hamas in Gaza. The timing of any such diplomacy is complicated as well. Across the region, but especially in Saudi Arabia, we heard the advice of Sen. Lindsey Graham being quoted: namely, that gaining the sixty-seven votes needed for Senate ratification of a U.S.-Saudi mutual defense treaty can only be achieved during a Democratic administration, so it is vital to pursue this diplomacy now.

But achieving a deal requires more than just good timing. We must remember that a mutual defense treaty is, by its nature, mutual. Although the Saudis are eager for the U.S. security umbrella that a treaty would provide, we heard very little about what they will provide in return. The Senate will not vote so easily to commit U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia's defense without a full understanding of how the kingdom will contribute to U.S. security. Importantly, the promise of Israel-Saudi normalization is not sufficient for the Senate.

We must also take into account the Trump factor. In recent weeks, we witnessed Donald Trump's success in upending the immigration/foreign aid bill, and his hold on the Republican Party will only tighten as the election grows closer. Trump may encourage Republican senators to oppose a U.S.-Saudi-Israel deal under President Biden, in part by promising to get a better deal himself. Trump's role as a wild card further complicates the issues of timing and substance, and much more needs to be done to bridge these gaps.

The one thing that became clear during our trip is that U.S. leadership is paramount. As bad actors seek to take advantage of the Hamas-Israel war and broader regional instability, sound diplomacy is more necessary than ever to secure American interests across the Middle East.

### Howard Berman

**S**ince the beginning of the Oslo process more than thirty years ago, I have had a longstanding interest in the hope of a two-state solution. Indeed, I have witnessed several attempts to achieve this solution, some of which came very close to success only to fall apart at the last minute. During our trip to Israel, however, it was clear that the idea of a two-state solution is out of sight for now.

By and large, Israelis of all political leanings are focused on their shared desire to achieve their national war aims—especially the dismantling of Hamas. In this environment, they have no appetite to even consider the idea of Palestinian statehood. Our visit to one of the kibbutzim attacked on October 7 provided a sobering yet crucial understanding of this national psyche.

Israel wants to prioritize security, especially in the southern zones (the "Gaza envelope") and the northern communities near the Lebanese border. First and foremost, this means eliminating Hamas's capacity for military operations and governance in Gaza, with specific emphasis on toppling the group's leadership. On a larger scale, Israel is concerned about the role that Iran has played—directly and indirectly—in the current crisis.

Finally, our trip emphasized the Biden administration's enduring commitment to supporting Israel and helping it achieve its war aims. President Biden has received tough criticism from various actors across the Middle East and even from some Israelis, but his support has been essential in helping them fight Hamas and deter wider escalation.

### Dana Stroul

**I**mmediately after October 7, the Biden administration articulated how it would back Israel and facilitate its destruction of Hamas's capabilities: namely, by making additional defense articles available, by enhancing the U.S. defense posture across the region, by advising the Israel Defense Forces on hostage recovery, and by supporting Israel's right to self-defense on the international stage. The United States has followed through on these lines of effort while keeping American forces uninvolved on the ground.

Washington has simultaneously dealt with two other regional crises. First, Iran activated its proxies to challenge Israel and punish the United States for backing Jerusalem. This resulted in more than 180 attacks by Iran-backed proxies on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, in addition to attacks against Israel. Rather than responding to each incident with counterstrikes, the administration's approach has been to selectively impose costs on Tehran and its proxies. This led to strikes against Iran-linked facilities in Iraq and Syria, followed by operations targeting Iraqi militia leaders. So far, this strategy has helped prevent the region from tipping into full-scale war, though it has seemingly failed to deter Tehran from supporting its proxies. Hence, it remains to be seen what these proxies will do next

Second, the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen have launched increasingly sophisticated attacks against commercial and military ships transiting the Red Sea and other regional waterways. They claim to be defending Palestinians in Gaza, but in reality their attacks have only threatened freedom of navigation and global commerce. Here, President Biden has pursued a twofold coalition approach: coordinating with regional and European partners to defend Red Sea navigation through Operation Prosperity Guardian, while also striking Houthi military infrastructure in Yemen with Britain and other partners.

In each Arab capital we visited, we heard that Houthi actions have directly affected the economy, especially due to shipping delays and a decline in tourism. But we have yet to see Arab governments increase their military participation in the coalition responses to this threat.

Regarding other Iran-backed groups, no major attacks have been reported since U.S. forces responded to the January 28 strike that killed three American personnel in Jordan. Yet this small success must be viewed in its larger context. Even before the tragedy in Jordan, officials in Baghdad and Washington had begun a political and military dialogue on transitioning U.S. troops out of Iraq. Since then, Iranian officials have reportedly traveled to Iraq and asked their proxies to keep things calm as this dialogue plays out, seemingly contributing to the relative quiet in recent weeks. That said, Tehran's ultimate objective is to expel the U.S. presence from the Middle East, so one can expect attacks to resume eventually.

## Ghaith al-Omari

Throughout the trip, we heard much talk about a "reformed Palestinian Authority" (RPA) being part of the solution to the current crisis. Yet there is a huge disconnect between Arabs and Israelis on this issue, so it is fair to be skeptical of the idea. In Israel, some officials said it might be possible to discuss PA reform sometime in the future, but all agreed there is no appetite for the idea now. In each of the Arab capitals we visited, the need for such reform was certainly a point of consensus, but the question of "how" varied between different governments—and often within the same government.

Moreover, no Arab state appeared willing to put in the hard work necessary for real PA reform. We heard varying ideas for cosmetic changes such as **replacing the prime minister (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/real-pa-reform-requires-more-just-new-prime-minister>)**, but there was no developed thinking on how to change the center of power from the top down. Likewise, many Arab interlocutors engaged in wishful thinking about the PA reassuming control over Gaza. The practicalities of such a transition and the amount of reform necessary to accomplish it render the idea virtually impossible, especially considering the likelihood of an Israeli security presence in Gaza for the foreseeable future.

Accordingly, U.S. policymakers should pursue four lines of effort:

1. Push Arab partners and relevant U.S. actors to develop a better understanding of what the "RPA" would look like.
2. Do more diplomatic work to align Israeli and Arab expectations on both the current issues and a broader solution.
3. Urge Arab partners to spend more of their political capital on achieving PA reform, particularly regarding President Mahmoud Abbas.
4. Push Arab and Israeli partners to do more thinking on who will fill the political vacuum in Gaza the "day after."

More immediately, Washington is concerned about how the approach of Ramadan might affect regional stability. Although the holy month will likely have little impact on war fighting in Gaza, religious sentiment is often heightened across the region during this period. As the war continues, imagery from Gaza has real potential to become explosive in neighboring states such as Jordan and Egypt. Even more worrisome is the potential for Jerusalem to become a flashpoint should anything disrupt the status quo at the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif during Ramadan, which would no doubt cause an explosive reaction in the West Bank.

## Michael Singh

The parallels between the current Israeli-Palestinian situation and the one Washington faced two decades ago are quite vivid, particularly in terms of setbacks to the pursuit of peace. To be sure, when one compares the zenith of the second intifada (the 2002 Passover massacre that killed 30 Israelis) with the October 7 attack (which killed more than 1,200), it is clear that the obstacles to peace are now greater than ever. Still, the U.S.-led "Roadmap" developed in 2002-2003 is a helpful guide when approaching the current crisis.

Much like today, neither side was initially willing to consider the U.S. diplomatic proposals when they were first put forward in 2002. Instead of skipping to the end of the process and declaring a state, however, the Roadmap envisioned a long first phase focused on reforming the PA, stabilizing Israeli and Palestinian security, and rebuilding the Palestinian economy. Only then, in the second and third phases, did the Roadmap envision discussions of statehood.

Today, the starting points for Israelis and Palestinians are further apart, and bridging that gap will be difficult. Yet Washington also has some advantages it did not have before—namely, Arab states have a much bigger stake in the process today, and the potential for a major player like Saudi Arabia to be involved should not be underestimated.

One crucial lesson from the Roadmap years is patience. After Hamas won key electoral victories in 2005, the United States tried to accelerate into the third phase too quickly, even though little reform or economic progress had been made. A similar narrative can be heard today, with stakeholders

calling for “Palestinian statehood first.” Prioritizing a statehood declaration before any institution-building is carried out would be a cosmetic solution that practically guarantees state failure. What is needed today is not heightened urgency to push for premature statehood, but rather a return to the strategy of patiently implementing reforms and building the institutions necessary for a lasting solution.

Regarding a potential Saudi peace track, much remains to be seen on what can be accomplished. Saudi officials currently seem more focused on potential agreements with the United States, and their chief regional concern is Iran, not events in Gaza. Despite U.S. hopes, they still view normalization with Israel as the price they must pay to reach a deal with Washington, not necessarily as an end goal in itself. The kingdom does want to embark on the path of normalization, but this outcome will be diluted if it comes after a drawn-out diplomatic process. Fortunately, this mindset is highly susceptible to U.S. diplomatic shaping.

*This summary was prepared by Frances McDonough.* ❖

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Ghaith al-Omari

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