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HOW PEACE IS POSSIBLE



Israel and Palestine: How peace is possible

A peace process can go wrong in many ways, but a real possibility exists that it could go right

This article is part of a December 2023 magazine special on solutions for peace in the Middle East that can be purchased [here](#).



IMAGE: OWEN GENT

IF YOU WANT to understand how desperately Israelis and Palestinians need peace, consider what would become of them in a state of perpetual war. Against a vastly superior Israeli army, the Palestinians' most powerful weapon would remain the death and suffering of their own people. Israel's fate would be woeful, too, if it wants to be a flourishing, modern democracy. If Israel permanently relies on its army to subjugate the Palestinians, it would become an apartheid-enforcing pariah. Israelis carrying out daily acts of oppression punctuated by rounds of killing would themselves be corrupted. For two peoples locked in a violent embrace, peace is the only deliverance.

But how to get there? Israelis are still reeling from the rape and murder of October 7th; Palestinians are watching the mangled bodies of women and children pile up in Gaza. Amid the carnage, outsiders' urging of peace seems naive. Besides, jaded Palestinians and Israelis see endless talks as a mechanism for delaying peace, not forging it. Negotiators in the past have thrashed out almost every imaginable permutation of land swaps and security arrangements. All failed.

[Read all our coverage of the war between Israel and Hamas](#)

And yet something changed after October 7th. Israel's strategy of marginalising the Palestinians and their dreams is broken. Both sides have a chance to find new leaders with a new vision. And after years of neglect, outsiders may be ready to help, crucially including a group of Arab countries. They must not fall into the trap of thinking that peace requires sweating the detail yet again. Success depends on the two sides wanting peace and—much harder—believing in it.

If the fighting is to make any sense it must lead to peace, which means two nations living side by side. Israel's bombardment has killed over 16,000 Palestinians, including Hamas fighters. Although some Palestinians have

been radicalised by that and the daily humiliations of occupation, many detest Hamas and its unwinnable wars and would live with Israel if they could prosper. So long as the men with guns do not get in their way, those people will seek peace. Israel, too, needs a new strategy. The old one failed to fulfil the state's basic promise to create a land safe for Jews; 1,400 people were killed or kidnapped by Hamas, hundreds of thousands more have been evacuated.

Peace also requires new leaders, because the present ones are discredited. In Israel Binyamin Netanyahu is an obstacle to a genuine reconciliation, the sooner he goes the better. America could usefully signal that it expects Israel to hold elections soon. Polls suggest that he will be replaced by Benny Gantz, a former general who understands the toll of war. Mr Gantz has not endorsed a Palestinian state, but neither has he ruled one out.

New Palestinian leadership is needed, too. Hamas is an avowed enemy of peace: for as long as it runs Gaza, Palestinian pledges to embrace peace will not be believable. On the West Bank, Mahmoud Abbas, who runs the Palestinian Authority (PA), is corrupt, ossified and lacks any democratic legitimacy. Amid the rubble of war, Gaza will need time to rebuild and re-establish some kind of stable administration. Moderate Arab countries should sponsor a transitional Palestinian leadership for the West Bank and Gaza that can begin building trust among its own people and, vitally, with the Israelis, before holding elections. By running both Gaza and the West Bank, it would become a more credible partner for peace.

That leads to the process. The Oslo accords, marked in 1993 with a wary handshake on the White House lawn, left the hardest details until last. Every inch of progress had to be wrung out of the two sides. This sapped belief that success was possible.

A new process must make early progress. Both sides will have to take on their own extremists, who would sabotage coexistence. The PA must shut down armed groups, foil terrorists and tackle corruption. Boosting the economy demands numerous agreements with Israel over trade, utilities and work permits. Palestinians need to know they are gaining freedoms and rights.

Land swaps can wait, but Israel should deal with the settlements too deep in the West Bank ever to be part of Israel. It must start policing them and stop them from expanding further. It needs to be clear that the 100,000 or so settlers who live in them will eventually have to move or come under Palestinian rule.

This is too hard for the Israelis and Palestinians to do on their own, so the outside world must be involved. Under Oslo, America was the sponsor, but it struggled to exert pressure on Israel, which can muster formidable support in Congress.

This time, the Arab world should play a decisive role. Under the Abraham accords, negotiated during the Trump administration, several countries recognised Israel. That was part of a vision for the Middle East based around trade and prosperity rather than ideology. Their money will be required to rebuild Gaza. Their soldiers can help provide security when Israel leaves the strip, which should happen as early as possible. If they work together, they can starve Hamas of money and shelter, diverting funds to reconstruction instead. Their heft can give a transitional Palestinian leader diplomatic cover while he establishes himself and his administration.

The key is early pressure exerted by America and Saudi Arabia on Israel and the Palestinians. The PA argues that peace could be kick-started if America and the European Union sent Israel a signal by recognising a Palestinian state upfront—an idea endorsed by Spain, which holds the EU presidency. America should fulfil its promise to open a diplomatic mission for the Palestinians in Jerusalem. But full recognition of Palestine by the West and of Israel by Saudi Arabia should be held out as rewards for the future, as an incentive for progress.

Time for that is short. Israel's anti-Palestinian right will remain strong. Once this government falls, the next may have only a single term to rekindle Israelis' faith that peace is possible. In the PA a new leader will face enemies who got fat under today's rotten system. Whatever remains of Hamas will seek to wreck peace, as will Iran and its proxies, who thrive on chaos and strife. The Biden administration may be willing to press Israel; a Trump administration might not. If permanent war is not to ruin two nations, Israelis, Palestinians and all who cherish them must seize the moment. ■

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Israel

This article appeared in the Leaders section of the print edition under the headline "How peace is possible"

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