

# Victory now, peace with the Arab world later

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 12.03.2025

The Trump administration seeks to expand the Abraham Accords, first and foremost with Saudi Arabia, however, the current reality on the ground does not encourage such moves in the near future. Saudi Arabia has declared that it will not establish relations with Israel without significant political progress with the Palestinians—an unacceptable demand from Israel's perspective. While moderate Arab leaders do recognize Hamas as a terrorist organization, they still harshly condemn Israel for its war in Gaza, portraying it as a war criminal, and the majority of the Arab public, influenced by extremely biased local media, shares this view.

The Arab plan for Gaza released last week reflects this attitude, calling for an end to the war and an "independent, sovereign Palestinian state" without even mentioning Hamas. In this sense, Hamas has, in the meantime, succeeded in achieving one of its main goals of this war, to prevent Israeli-Saudi conciliation. With Israel on the brink of renewing its military effort to oust Hamas, this situation is unlikely to change in the coming months, and we must recognize this fact.

However, despite bringing emotional sympathy and commitment to Palestinians across the Arab world to a relative peak, at no point in recent decades has Israel been more important for Arab security and geopolitical interests, whereas support for the Palestinian cause does nothing to assist Arab's many internal challenges; in fact, it may worsen them.

For example, Jordan faces internal pressure from Islamists emboldened by the fall of the Assad regime and is experiencing a severe economic crisis, while relying on Israel for energy and water. Syria is devastated and fragmented along ethnic-religious lines, and its Islamist leader is willing to act with restraint to stabilize the regime—though it is important to note that any hope for rebuilding the country after 14 years of war is largely due to Israel's military campaign against Hezbollah and Iran.

Lebanon, which for the first time in decades has a government capable of

countering Hezbollah's dominance, is in this position only because Israeli actions weakened the Shi'ite organization and opened a window for restoring national sovereignty.

Similarly, Egypt is dealing with economic collapse due to declining Suez Canal revenues caused by Houthi attacks in the Red Sea—attacks that only Israel has shown a willingness to counter effectively.

The Gulf states that signed peace agreements with Israel maintain their relations despite their critical diplomatic rhetoric. They understand that their economies remain one-dimensional, dependent on energy exports, and that they must cooperate with innovative and creative partners—Israel being exactly such a partner.

Saudi Arabia is at a critical juncture: despite its wealth, half of its GDP still comes from the energy sector. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 faces many challenges and depends largely on importing innovation to make Saudi Arabia relevant in the era of artificial intelligence. Meanwhile, the kingdom faces internal threats to the crown prince's life due to his controversial policies, which could be entirely reversed if someone else were to take over. Beyond this, like many countries in the region, Saudi Arabia benefits greatly from the reduction in Iranian influence across the region—a direct result of Israel's actions in recent months.

In this context, any demand for the establishment of a Palestinian state as a price for peace with Saudi Arabia is baseless. It will not help Arab states address their challenges; rather, it may destabilize what little stability they have.

Somewhat counterintuitively, if Israel were to pursue the Egyptian-led plan by pursuing a ceasefire without first eliminating Hamas, this would actually remove any incentive the Arab states have for advancing relations with Israel as it would mean Israel is too weak to follow through on its war aims. This would translate into a windfall for Islamists across the region. Therefore, Israel must reject the idea that diplomatic relations are contingent on concessions to the Palestinians.

Saudi Arabia will not extend a hand to a weak partner incapable of defeating their mutual enemies, of which Hamas is the smaller and Iran the larger. The only way to reshape the regional landscape is for Israel to achieve a swift and decisive victory in Gaza through a combination of fully conquering the territory and

creating a passageway to allow Gazans who seek to leave the Strip to do so, unpopular as both of these might be with many states in the region. At the same time, Israel must carry out a large-scale attack on Iran's nuclear program to complete the shift in the Middle East's balance of power. Only afterward can Israel return to discussing peace with Saudi Arabia and other countries—but this time from a position of strength.

Published in JNS, March 12, 2025.