



Middle East Dialogue

Middle East Track II Dialogues Initiative, Wilson Center

Chairs: Randa Slim, Hafsa Halawa | Report Author: Hafsa Halawa
Rapporteur & Report Editor: Faria Nasruddin

February 21–22, 2025 | Istanbul, Turkey

Gaza & Israel

This meeting provides regional perspectives, with no Israelis or Palestinians present. It was convened following the Arab leaders' meeting in Riyadh on February 20, 2025, and prior to the Arab Summit in Cairo on March 4, 2025. It came amid heightened tensions between Washington and Riyadh following Trump's social media posts on the "Trump Gaza" and "Gaza Riviera" plans. The "Gaza Reconstruction Plan" as presented by Egypt was not yet public, and the ceasefire was in a precarious state but still holding (now having collapsed as of March 17, 2025).

Amid a "bumpy, but successful" phase I of the ceasefire agreement, an Arab UN official noted disappointment in the announcements from Washington, suggesting a "Nakba 2.0" with US President Donald Trump's plans to displace the entirety of the population of Gaza.

The challenge of the last 16 months, since the war first began after the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, remains that there is complete US cover, if not outright support for Israel's war in Gaza and settler expansion and violence in the West Bank, alongside weak European positions. The UN official went further in explaining the challenges on a political and diplomatic level: "When it comes to finding a political solution, the international relations parameters are still the same two-state solution, which seems to be an easy way out for all stakeholders. The US is not a stakeholder anymore. The framework is like what the international community has been saying minus the US, while the international community found refuge in the Saudi-led initiative because it is easier to stick to these parameters and to offer two states while the reality on the ground does not allow for two states to be realized territorially and administratively.

A Saudi official present at the meeting confirmed the contours of what has become the "Gaza Reconstruction Plan" as presented by the Egyptians at the Arab Summit on March 4, 2025. They also confirmed that the World Bank and the IMF are working on the recovery of the Levant in

collaboration with the Saudi government, which is envisaged as a wider reconstruction plan for Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria.

A Jordanian policy expert noted that Jordan's political and diplomatic position remains precarious following King Abdullah's meeting at the White House with President Trump. While defending the king's policy of a "step-by-step" approach with the Trump administration, the expert noted the problem lies within the framework itself and "the paradigm of Trump towards Gaza and the West Bank. There is no two-state solution on the table, Israel will never accept it." The expert defended Jordan's position against the transfer or forced displacement of the Palestinians but noted the domestic criticism against Foreign Minister Ayman al Safadi for his statements placing red lines against Israel and conduct that would be seen as a declaration of war by the Jordanians.

A Saudi official noted the importance of presenting a more powerful response to Israel's ongoing aggression: "there has been a major confrontation with the US and Israel in a global context where there are no other powers standing with us—this is really powerful. There are major differences between the Arab countries, but there are major agreements as well." Furthermore, the official lamented that Saudi Arabia, as leading the process, would bear the brunt of the responsibility for its success and the blame for its failure. While noting the different reconstruction plans that have been proposed, the Saudi official noted that reconstruction fundamentally was not the core issue and that there were spoilers within the Israeli and Palestinian body politics that could easily sabotage any attempts to get a wider deal with Trump on the future of the Palestinian state. "The only peace possible is an imposed peace, and the only leader possible to do so is Trump. What can we pose to Trump that will satisfy the basic principles of protecting Palestinians, realizing a viable Palestinian state, and offer integration in the region? That is our [Arabs'] job."

It remains that the greatest challenges for any plan for Gaza are administration and security. The Jordanian expert noted this remained a primary role for Palestinian leadership: "the Arabs will not push for disarmament in the presence of occupation and without security commitments or a state. It is the role of the Palestinian state to deal with the disarming of non-state actors, and we are trying to communicate this to the Americans." Bigger questions remain about the disarmament of Hamas, what incentives or drivers would support this move, and how relinquishing power could be presented to the group as something bigger than merely ceding to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Meanwhile, the Saudi official opined on the best way to engage the Trump administration on the issue of the Palestinians: "In Saudi Arabia, we don't think that you can bring Trump a peace process, [a proposal to] restart negotiations, or a plan that takes years. We think what needs to happen is a final settlement needs to be put on the table, and then you need to work backward."

One participant posed the question of what the region might look like in three or four years amid this seismic shift and war against the Palestinians, asking "what does a real second Nakba really mean for the region?" An Arab official noted that the worst-case scenario for the Arab States was actively being pushed by voices around Trump, who they view as expressing an

“Armageddon mentality.” They also noted that Israeli society is not a monolith, and it would be a mistake to look at Israel’s politics and its society only through the lens of the most radical elements, even if they are in the ascendency. They noted the example of an Arab country working with senior rabbis to convince the Israeli government to unlock PA funds that had been frozen following the outbreak of war. Even so, there was an acknowledgment of the difficulty of this moment: “we are so traumatized by what the Israelis have been doing for decades and the genocide—in the midst of a radical US president how far can this go. We have to use all the tools we can have. Let’s stop casting negative energy to people trying to think outside the box. We are in full agreement that we need to protect Palestinian rights. None of the resistance narrative and failed engagement was helpful in preventing the genocide from happening.”

Meanwhile, as the Palestinian issue continues to define the wider region’s relationship with Israel, a dialogue participant looked at the immediate term and posed the hypothesis that Israel’s main lesson from the Gaza War has been that “they are heavily influential in the US.” They pointed out that Netanyahu “has concluded that he can solve his problems militarily. He doesn’t need peace with Egypt and Jordan. One of the issues for Jordan is that the US cares about it only through the Israel lens, but now it’s all expendable. If you can settle the West Bank, Lebanon, Gaza, [and] Syria militarily then there is no need for talking. You don’t need to co-exist but dominate the region. Everyone recognizes Israel on Israel’s terms.” Thus, the region is faced with Israel believing it can remake a new Middle Eastern order in its own name. An Emirati policy expert noted that this mentality was being reinforced by messaging from the Trump administration with regard to the wider world: the US threats against Canada, Panama, and Greenland and tacit support for Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Participants noted that despite the military power of Israel and its continued aggression, it remains the case that there is a crisis inside the country: “they don’t have a national identity. They are moving up as a Jewish state more than an Israeli state. Israel must be put within the nation-state context.” Nevertheless, a debate on whether this moment was the most dangerous for the region in the last 75 years forced the discussion on what Israel may yet be able to do or achieve in the coming three to four years. There was consensus agreement that in the short-to medium-term Israel would continue to seek the eradication of Palestinian claim to their lands and to push forward on the agenda of displacement while tying their policy towards the Palestinians with a wider confrontation with Iran.

While Gulf officials confirmed that their foreign policy position remains steadfast against any threat to Iran’s national security, there remains a fundamental disagreement on the way to achieve this through arrangements and agreements between Iran and Arab countries. Beyond Israel, there are core disagreements over the view of existential threats and national security challenges in the region, with the role of armed non-state actors still a sensitive topic that remains unresolved. Even as Saudi Arabia and Iran step up their bilateral relations and remain committed to the terms of the Beijing Agreement, which has served them well in putting forward a joint position against Israel and could prove successful in developing joint

approaches for countries like Syria and even Lebanon, the question of Yemen’s stability and the role of the Houthis is a clear sticking point between the two countries.

One Iranian official noted that the “continued threat perception from Iran is that our Arab neighbors have been maneuvering to weaken Iran.” Meanwhile, a Saudi official argued the perception was dated and that there had been a reset with Beijing Agreement, which has sought to create a new narrative on Iran-Arab relations. A Turkish policy expert echoed this, noting that gaps remain where “we [the region] don’t have a problem with how Iran talks, but this issue is with how [they] behave. If we see a change in behavior, then we are all open to it.” To which an Iranian official reiterated their position that the region will win or lose together, including Iran.

In concluding a debate on the role of Iran and the threat perceptions as seen from all sides of the region, a Saudi official emphatically set the parameters for how the region can move forward in its relationship with Iran: “no forward defense. No proxies, no friends, [or] allies. We need to protect Lebanon, Syria, [and] Iraq. We will work together on the Palestinian issue. We are more than ready to work with all our influence and leverage and protecting Iran against any threats and resolving the Palestinian issue is core.”

There is clear consensus and urgency around the need to protect the region from continued Israeli expansionism and aggression. This includes the risk of confrontation with Iran and Israel’s growing messaging that it is prepared and readying itself to strike Iran. Even as there has been high-level dialogue between Iran and GCC states, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia remains suspicious of Iran and has significant grievances, alongside other Gulf allies, towards Iran for its “forward defense” policy and arming of non-state actors in the Arab region.

The state of regional affairs was well-defined in conclusion by a Lebanese expert who said, “for the first time I see a convergence in the region around a shared existential threat, and if we start with this, then we can move into strategies, the toolbox, [and] what each can do and be part of a coordinated strategy of dealing with this shared existential threat. What are we going to do individually and collectively? But the timing is not [in our favor] so messaging and actions must change rapidly.”

There is a clear need for deeper dialogue efforts at track 1.5 and track 1 between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and also Iran, the Arab States, and Turkey more widely. Confidence-building measures need to be strengthened, as there has been a clear move away from the language of normalization.