

What steps toward peace could Israelis and Palestinians take now?

A noncomprehensive list of realistic, practical actions

by [Cary Nelson](#) in the [January 29, 2020](#) issue



Photo by Kish Kim / Sipa USA (via AP Images)

With Israeli voters headed in March to their third parliamentary election in 12 months, Israeli politics is deadlocked. Neither of the major party blocs has been able to form a government. While the era of Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister, may be nearing an end, following his indictment on corruption charges, it's not clear what will take its place.

Amid all this uncertainty, efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are likely to remain on the back burner. But perhaps this moment can be used to clarify the kind

of conversation that needs to happen.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict presents a challenge to all who care about peace. That's true especially for religious people, who try—or should try—to avoid demonizing one side or the other. The priority should be on finding and promoting means to diminish hatred, encourage reconciliation, and recognize each side's needs, fears, and historical perspectives. The focus should be on finding practical measures for ending the conflict.

In this work, even small-scale projects of reconciliation can make a significant contribution. There are already many examples of such projects. The Jerusalem International YMCA, for example, has been bringing young Jews and Palestinians together for education since 1933. Hand in Hand runs several bilingual schools in Israel that educate Jews and Palestinians in the same classrooms. An Israeli NGO has yearly been training a combined group of Jews and Palestinians in how to conduct peace negotiations; should negotiations begin in earnest, these people will be ready to assist. Programs like these will not directly produce changes in national policy, but they can establish trust and create the conditions for negotiations.

Practical steps to build trust, improve lives, and establish conditions favorable to formal negotiations necessarily occur at the intersection between political and technical issues. Unfortunately, a sense of political hopelessness too often leaves people unwilling to recognize that some problems have straightforward technical solutions. And that in turn means that the potential to improve the political climate by pursuing technical solutions is ignored.

The recommendations that follow include some that are primarily political, others that are mainly technical. However, a strict separation between the two categories never obtains. My aim is to identify actions that will help change the status quo, substitute understanding for hatred and distrust, and prepare both peoples to negotiate in good faith. Some of these steps are not possible outside a formal peace agreement and a resolution of all outstanding issues, but some can be started now.

I begin by laying out some fundamental principles for a two-state solution and highlighting some steps that would be needed to implement it. I then point to some actions that would improve the lives of people in the West Bank and, finally, Gaza. My list is not meant to be comprehensive, but it is meant to demonstrate and underscore what realistic, practical peacemaking will entail.

There are clearly more imperatives here for Israelis to act than Palestinians, in part because Israelis are the greater power and have overall control of the West Bank. It is also likely that the Palestinian Authority will have more flexibility to act if Israel sets an example by unilaterally improving conditions. The PA security services, however, have prevented hundreds of terrorist acts since 2015, a pattern that could be further improved with greater public support. Curtailing violence and incitement to violence is the single highest priority for the PA if it wants to see good faith efforts by Israel.

When it comes to Gaza, however, I have little faith in the ability of the ruling Hamas party to reform itself or even its interest in doing so, other than eliminating rocket attacks and violence on the border. There are humanitarian and pragmatic reasons for Israel to initiate reforms in Gaza, but reciprocity is not a realistic expectation.

Fundamental principles for a two-state solution: As part of a two-state agreement, Israel would (1) explicitly abandon all ambitions to establish a Greater Israel encompassing the West Bank; (2) commit itself to accepting a modified version of the pre-1967 borders; and (3) agree to the division of Jerusalem with East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state.

The Palestinians would (1) specify that a final status agreement would settle all issues and end the conflict; (2) recognize Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people and agree that the right of return for Palestinian refugees would be limited to returning to a Palestinian state and, except for those who have immediate family members who are Israeli citizens, not to Israel; and (3) accept a form of nonmilitarized sovereignty in the Palestinian state, consistent with restrictions that guarantee Israel's security

Despite public posturing to the contrary, there is actually already basic agreement on these points among negotiators for the two parties.

These principles mean that any solution will combine separation and collaboration. Physical separation into two states, with a physical barrier, can include cooperation in security, infrastructure, and economic development. That will make it possible over time to relax security constraints.

Even with a final agreement in hand, achievement of a Palestinian state will not happen overnight. Full implementation depends on interim conditions being met. It must include redeployment of Israeli security forces with target timetables,

benchmarks, and an effective remediation process. The first area targeted for redeployment might be the northern area of the West Bank—between Jenin and Nablus—given the relative lack of Israeli settlements to be evacuated and the economic and political practicality of anchoring the area with Palestinian cities at each end.

The Palestinian Authority would maintain an enhanced security force equipped with mutually agreed-upon weapons. It would include an elite counterterrorism unit capable of handling internal threats both to its own and Israel's security. Israel would not limit Palestinian mobility within an established Palestinian state and would not intrude on Palestinian territory with ground forces short of a grave emergency, like a foreign army invading the Palestinian state.

Israeli settlers would be financially rewarded for willingly leaving areas east of the security barrier and in a staged process. Those refusing to leave would be physically removed by the IDF from a future Palestinian state. They would be given new housing in exchange for the loss of their homes and reimbursed for moving costs.

The overall goal is the creation of a single Palestinian state composed of both the West Bank and Gaza and governed by the Palestinian Authority. But that aim requires the complete dismantling of Gaza's offensive military capacities, including all rocket and missile systems.

Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian security forces would share watch lists and biometric data for secure identification. This would ease the transit across borders for preapproved travelers.

In the interim period prior to the establishment of a Palestinian state, Israel must take responsibility for restoring law and order to Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem and villages nearby and for upgrading municipal and welfare services there, making them comparable to those available in West Jerusalem. Economic investments in East Jerusalem should be encouraged both regionally and internationally. A continuous police presence is needed to eliminate illegal weapons and curtail criminal activity. The goal is to increase personal security for both East and West Jerusalem, while giving economic hope to those who lack it.

No formal Israeli annexation of any West Bank territory should take place prior to a negotiated settlement. Limited annexation of settlement blocks near the Green Line would not literally make a two-state solution impossible, but it would almost

certainly send a highly damaging political message. Annexation of settlements deeper into the West Bank could make a Palestinian state composed of continuous territory impossible, while also convincing governments worldwide that Israel had entirely abandoned the two-state solution.

Toward the forming of two states: Under any agreement, border areas near Ben-Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv would not transition to Palestinian control until some years into the implementation of the two-state process. The rise of ISIS and Iran's intrusion into Syria have increased Israeli concern about the security of the Jordan Valley under a Palestinian state. The defeat of ISIS did not convince Israelis that other regional actors will not present a security threat. Proposals to address these concerns include establishment of a two-kilometer wide security zone along the Jordan River. It would parallel and be comparable to the security zone Jordan has established on its side of the river.

Construction of a Palestinian airport is a matter both of pride and economic opportunity for a Palestinian state. Despite restrictions necessary to Israel's security, a Palestinian airport in the Jordan Valley is needed, as well as an offshore Gaza port facility. Palestinians could exercise sovereignty from the ground to 10,000 feet, with Israeli air force planes free to traverse Palestinian territory above that level. Regional coordination of flights would be maintained, with provision for Israel taking temporary control of Palestinian airspace in the case of a national defense emergency.

Israel must state clearly and unequivocally that it has no claims to sovereignty over the Palestinian neighborhoods and villages of East Jerusalem. In 1967, Israel annexed the Palestinian neighborhoods and villages surrounding Jerusalem to the city's municipal jurisdiction, despite the fact that they had not previously been part of the city. This hasty and coercive move was an error of historic proportions.

Helping residents of the West Bank: Both for humanitarian and strategic reasons Israel should move to improve the quality of daily life and economic opportunity on the West Bank, where the unemployment rate is at about 26 percent. Israel should announce a formal policy ending settlement expansion east of the security barrier and issue a firm declaration that it has no territorial ambitions east of the security barrier.

Israel should strengthen the formal commitment to maintaining the status quo on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. It should also expand the collection of biometric

data for Palestinians seeking to work in or visit Israel and use that data to preapprove thousands of Palestinians for rapid entry into Israel. It should establish separate fast lanes at checkpoints to make transit for those Palestinians much easier and more efficient and issue 50,000 additional work permits for Palestinians seeking employment in Israel proper, in addition to those added between 2016 and 2018. Palestinians who want to work in Israel should be able to do so.

Israel should complete the missing sections of the security barrier. Violence is typically perpetrated by Palestinians passing through gaps in the security barrier, not by those whom Israel approves for passage from the West Bank through checkpoints. Reducing the flow of weapons into Israeli settlements should help curtail Israeli violence as well.

Palestinians on the West Bank need new water lines to develop Palestinian agriculture; they need increased water allotments for farming and more use of recycled water, a practice that works well for Israeli agriculture.

It should be made easier to ship Palestinian agricultural products and manufacturing goods across the West Bank into Israel and to port facilities for shipment elsewhere, including to countries that do not trade with Israel. Additional paved roads should be constructed in Palestinian areas.

Palestinians need easier ways to make financial exchanges between Israeli and Palestinian banks, and they need better internet and wireless communications. An international small business loan fund should be started to support business initiatives in the West Bank.

Israel can begin planning for the transfer of 10 percent of Area C of the West Bank to Palestinian control under Areas A and B, thereby linking many of the fragmentary segments of Areas A and B, as designated by the Oslo Accords, into continuous territory. Transferring this small amount of territory to Palestinian Authority control will strengthen the PA's ability to secure law and order, strengthen the Palestinian economy, and legalize thousands of homes currently under threat of demolition.

Humanitarian aid to Gaza: Without significant interventions, parts of the Gaza Strip may soon be unfit for human habitation. The electrical grid is disintegrating and is only intermittently functional. Sewage treatment is essentially nonexistent, with raw sewage flowing in the streets and into the Mediterranean, contaminating coastal areas. The risks to health are substantial and pandemics a possibility. The

shortage of drinkable water is acute, with almost all the water in Gaza's coastal aquifer now contaminated and undrinkable. Unemployment is over 40 percent. A humanitarian crisis can produce a major political crisis.

Hamas seems uninterested in improving residents' lives, the Palestinian Authority is reluctant to enhance Hamas's status by doing so, and Egypt is unwilling to assume any responsibility for Gaza's humanitarian needs. But Israel has a humanitarian and security interest in forestalling an impending disaster. Although Israel left Gaza in 2005, it still controls access by sea, supplies much of the area's energy needs, and oversees its northern and eastern borders. Israel should pursue these goals:

- Increase the number of trucks delivering goods passing from Israel into Gaza through the Kerem Shalom and Erez crossings at Gaza's southeast corner and northern borders.
- Encourage Egypt to reopen the Rafah crossing on Gaza's southern border permanently, with appropriate vetting to prevent travel to Iran for military and arms manufacture training.
- Eliminate the smuggling of weapons through underground tunnels between Egypt and Gaza. Establishing an additional commercial crossing point between Israel and Gaza would help Gaza's economy and relieve the overburdened Kerem Shalom crossing.
- Urge the Palestinian Authority to accept and cooperate in sending humanitarian aid to Gaza.
- Expand Gazan fishing rights in the Mediterranean to at least 15 miles.
- Issue additional permits for Gazans to work in Israel, with thorough security vetting. Ease entry restrictions on travel to Israel for medical services.
- Call on international aid organizations to help fund and carry out the reconstruction of Gaza's electricity infrastructure. Build a large solar field in Israel to supply Gaza with additional electricity. Begin plans for foreign development of a natural gas field off the Gaza coast.
- Assemble an international coalition to meet Gaza's acute sewage treatment needs.
- Expand opportunities for Gazans to study abroad; work with Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority so more Palestinians can exit through the Rafah crossing and

travel through Cairo or Amman to study. Start a pilot program for carefully vetted Gazans to study in the West Bank.

- Curtail Hamas's diversion of materials and resources into tunneling activity and military buildup. Encourage internationally supervised expenditures on reconstruction of housing, medical facilities, and infrastructure. The UN has failed to enforce the 2014 Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism that was designed to prevent repurposing materials for military use. Explicit sanctions should be applied if Hamas repurposes aid, and reconstruction work needs to be internationally monitored. This should enable Israel to relax restrictions on shipping dual-purpose items into Gaza.
- Encourage additional agricultural and manufacturing exports from Gaza to Israel and elsewhere. Imports and exports do not present comparable security risks for Israel. Although transport of goods from Gaza has been substantially increased since 2011-2014, the 2016 level was still only 15 percent of what it was in 1999.
- Make completion of a new water pipeline from Israel to Gaza a priority. Help establish substantial desalinization capacity in Gaza.
- Continue upgrading the security barrier along the border with Gaza and continue to develop and apply tunnel construction detection technology.
- Establish an international small business loan fund to support private initiatives in Gaza.
- Construct a rail line from the Erez crossing on Gaza's northern border to Israel's Ashdod port on the Mediterranean to increase exports from Gaza.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "What peace would require."