

Foreign Affairs Committee: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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What can – and should – the UK do, in cooperation with regional and international partners, to help bring about a ceasefire?

About the author

1. Professor Aran's main research interests lie in the international relations of the region, with special reference to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the foreign policy of Middle Eastern states.
2. An experienced media commentator across broadcast, print and online, Professor Aran regularly provides expert comment on Middle Eastern affairs for the BBC, Bloomberg, France 24, LBC, and the Conversation.
3. He has previously briefed government ministers during the Cameron administration and lectures regularly at the Royal College of Defence, lectured at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office before the pandemic and has contributed to policy-making forums through his work with the European Union's Middle East Peace Task Force, ETN Zurich and Oxford Analytica.
4. The author of three acclaimed books including *Israeli foreign policy since the end of the Cold War*, published by Cambridge University Press, he has also published in academic journals including *International Affairs*, *International Politics* and *Foreign Policy Analysis*.

Background to the current situation

1. The Middle East is experiencing dramatic political and military shifts. A lightning attack launched by several armed rebel groups—backed partly by Turkey—recently toppled the 54-year long Assad regime in Syria.
2. The timing of the 27 November 2024 rebel attack, which began only a few hours after the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, was not coincidental. It reflected the dramatic weakening of two of the Assad regime's main pillars—Hezbollah and Iran—since the outbreak of the 7 October 2023 war which was triggered by Hamas's deadly attacks on Israel.
3. Hezbollah's political-military leadership has been eliminated by Israel and an estimated 80 per cent of its weapons have been destroyed by the Israel Defence Force (IDF).
4. Alongside these events, in addition to losing its most significant regional ally, Hezbollah, Iran has suffered severe military blows caused by Israeli attacks. Following Iran's 1 October 2024 assault on Israel, involving some 200 ballistic missiles, Israel responded with precise air strikes which destroyed significant parts of Iran's air defence capabilities, and components of its missile-production capacity and its nuclear programme.

5. Iran is now more vulnerable than before to Israeli attacks and, also, faces the prospect of a more aggressive White House administration, following President-elect Donald J. Trump's election victory. This means that Iran's ability to project its power regionally and to shore up the Assad regime in the face of the rebels' assault, has been severely diminished.
6. The third pillar of the Assad regime, Russia, has also been enfeebled. Embroiled in the war it launched against Ukraine in February 2022, Russia was either unwilling or unable to support the Assad regime during those final days.
7. The collapse of the Assad regime and frailty of its former allies has dramatically weakened the so-called Axis of Resistance (hereafter Axis) comprised of Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, the Assad regime, and Iran. During the first ten months of the war the Axis possessed a veto power of sorts; it refused to stop its attacks on Israel unless Israel first stopped its war in Gaza.
8. However, the ceasefire in Lebanon and the ending of the Assad regime has broken the veto power of the Axis on what occurs in Gaza and other parts of the region. The greater military and political pressure to which Hamas is now subject, having lost its key regional backers, has significantly improved the prospect of a ceasefire in Gaza and diminished the threat posed to Israel.

The role of the UK in bringing about a ceasefire

1. This shift presents the UK with new opportunities to promote an ambitious two-phased plan that would leverage the UK's Special Relationship with the US and its strong ties with Middle Eastern partners, to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza and a sustainable Arab-Israeli peace.
2. Phase one would be predicated upon securing a lasting ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and the safe distribution of aid, alongside a start to the huge task of rebuilding the Gaza Strip and resettling Gazans in the areas they inhabited prior to 7 October 2023.
3. This first phase would be the springboard to phase two, which would involve the UK, the US and regional partners promoting and establishing an 'outside-in' approach to achieving a comprehensive and sustainable Arab-Israeli peace, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
4. The evidence below proposes a 'road map' for what the UK can—and should—do to achieve this, whilst working with regional and global partners and drawing lessons from past UK policies.

First goal for UK: Securing a ceasefire and forming an international governing body for the Gaza Strip

1. The first UK goal, achieved in full collaboration with the US - must be a sustainable ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and the release of all dead and alive Israeli hostages in exchange for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.
2. The ceasefire agreed by Israel and Hezbollah on 27 November 2024 provides a useful template, which, with modifications, could be applied to a Gaza Strip ceasefire.
3. It would involve Israel and Hamas promising to observe an initial 60-day temporary ceasefire, as in the Israel and Hezbollah agreement. During this 60-day period, all

living and dead Israeli hostages would be released by Hamas in exchange for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

4. The precise numbers and identities of these Palestinian prisoners would be subject to approval by Israeli and Hamas negotiators. During this initial ceasefire period the IDF would remain deployed in the Gaza Strip, in line with the pattern set by the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire agreement which stipulates that the IDF maintains its presence in south Lebanon.
5. The UK government should seek to set up and, together with the US, to co-chair the monitoring of the Hamas-Israel ceasefire, performing a role, within this framework, similar to that being played by France alongside the US, in monitoring the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire.
6. In addition to this co-chairing of the ceasefire monitoring mechanism, the UK should be a leading player in establishing a temporary international body charged with governing the post-security security and civilian governance of the Gaza Strip. Ideally, this international governing body should include Palestinian technocrats, representatives of Arab states—especially Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and potentially Saudi Arabia, the UK, and the US.

Second goal for the UK: Establishing sustainable development and security in the Gaza Strip

1. Phase two would start with the conclusion to the 60-day ceasefire period, the honouring of the hostages-for-prisoner deal by Hamas and Israel and the establishment of the temporary international governing body for the Gaza Strip. The goal of phase two would be to create the conditions for sustainable development in the Gaza Strip and establish viable security arrangements. Its achievement will require the following from the UK.
2. First, as a leading member of the international body governing the Gaza Strip, the UK should be central in monitoring and supporting the safe distribution of humanitarian aid and enabling the safe return of Gazans to the areas they inhabited prior to the 7 October 2023 war.
3. The widespread destruction wrought on Gaza means that the international governing body will have to provide adequate and sustainable temporary living conditions, until the huge task of rebuilding the Gaza Strip is completed.
4. Second, based on its proven summitry capabilities, the UK should host a ‘global aid summit’ to generate immediate term funding from international aid and longer term finance to support the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip.
5. Third, the UK’s experience of integrating humanitarian organisations—many UK-based—in humanitarian efforts, should be exploited to achieve the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip.
6. Fourth, the UK’s excellent security ties with the US, Israel, and other Middle East partners (especially Arab Gulf States and Jordan) should be exploited to co-convene a working group. This working group would be responsible for security arrangements across the Gaza Strip’s international borders.
7. Its first task would be to establish security at the Rafah Crossing, which, prior to 7 October 2023, was used by Hamas for the illicit transfer of goods and weapons from

the Sinai Peninsula to the Gaza Strip and augmented Hamas's web of tunnels under the Egypt-Gaza international border or the Philadelphi corridor, used to transfer goods and weapons.

8. To prevent any recurrence of these transfers and the renewal of hostilities between Israel and Gazans, the UK-led working group should propose a three-tier system to secure the Gaza-Egypt border.
9. The first tier would consist of US and UK border officers working alongside Palestinians and representatives from Arab states at the Rafah crossing terminals. Alternatively, the UK could offer its expertise in training and monitoring local border officers.
10. The second tier would comprise installation of state-of-the-art surveillance systems at the Rafah border crossing and throughout the Philadelphi corridor.
11. The third tier would include the construction of a physical above ground and underground barrier to prevent any reopening or rebuilding of the tunnels Hamas used to smuggle goods from the Sinai Peninsula. This barrier would also obstruct the construction of the 'offensive tunnels', built by Hamas in the past, which it sought to use to launch attacks against Israeli civilian border-towns and Kibbutzim.
12. The UK should also play a central part in designing the post-war security arrangements across the international Israel-Gaza border. It should exploit its close security ties with Israel, which have deepened since the outbreak of the 7 October 2023 War, its longstanding security ties with regional Arab partners, including Arab Gulf states and Jordan, and its Special Relationship with the US.
13. Part of its proposed plan for post-war border security across the Israel-Gaza border should include a 1km buffer zone, established west of the Israeli border, to coincide with the withdrawal of the IDF from the Gaza Strip and its redeployment along the Israel-Gaza border. Reducing the scope for renewed Israeli-Palestinian friction and preventing attempts by Jewish settlers to enter the Gaza Strip will depend on the establishment of this buffer zone.

Third goal for the UK: Promoting an 'outside-in' regional approach to sustainable peace

1. The UK's previous position has been that the priority must be resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as a precondition for securing a comprehensive peace between Israel and Arab states. This has been considered an 'inside-out' approach to Arab-Israeli peace that starts with the Israeli-Palestinian 'inner circle' and proceeds to include the 'outer circle' of the Gulf and North Africa Arab states.
2. However, the failure of this inside-out strategy, which began over 30 years ago with the Oslo Peace Accords in September 1993, should be a strong signal that the UK should change direction.
3. I suggest that, rather, the UK, in close coordination with the US, should opt for an 'outside in' approach, which focuses on peace between Israel and Arab states as preceding an Israeli-Palestinian peace. Importantly, the 2020 Abraham Peace Accords between Israel and the four Arab states of Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates were part of an outside-in strategy that guided the first Trump administration.

4. It is likely, therefore, that expanding the Abraham Accords will be the cornerstone of US-Middle East foreign policy under the second Trump administration. This suggests that, in the first instance, following the cessation of hostilities in the Gaza Strip, the UK should seek to play an essential role in expanding the Abraham Accords to include an Israeli-Saudi and Israeli-Omani peace agreement.
5. An expansion to these agreements would see the number of Arab-Israeli peace agreements increase from six (currently) to eight (i.e., Bahrain-Israel, Egypt-Israel, Jordan-Israel, Oman-Israel, Morocco-Israel, Saudi-Arabia-Israel, Sudan-Israel, UAE-Israel), at a time when Iran and its allies were dramatically weakened.
6. This regional shift could be exploited by the UK to proceed to phase two of the outside-in approach to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace: renewing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with the aim of ending the conflict and establishing an independent Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank.
7. The resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations should be accompanied by negotiations geared towards establishing full normalisation between Israel and the three key Muslim-majority states of Indonesia, Pakistan and Malaysia, in tandem with the signing of an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord.
8. There would be several advantages attached to the UK government's adoption of an outside-in rather than an inside-out regional approach to Arab-Israeli peace.
9. The Palestinian national movement is unprecedentedly fragmented. Hamas's leadership has been all but eliminated and the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is 89 years old. This makes it difficult, at the present time, to identify a Palestinian leadership with both the legitimacy and the ability to agree to the concessions that a peace deal with Israel would entail.
10. However, a wide regional coalition of Arab states that had concluded peace agreements with Israel and supported plans for a resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, would compensate for the current Palestinian fragmentation and leadership deficit.
11. There is virtually no support in Israel for a peace deal that would include the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.
12. For instance, in July 2024, the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), passed legislation 'opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state West of Jordan', as part even of a negotiated settlement with Israel, by a majority of 68-9. In these circumstances, proposing the establishment of a Palestinian state as part of full Arab-Israeli normalisation and in tandem with full normalisation between Israel and key Muslim-majority states, could shift Israeli public opinion to support such a negotiated peace settlement.
13. In 2020, the previous Trump administration's peace plan, dubbed 'The Deal of the Century', to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was based on the following:
14. Palestinian sovereignty over the Gaza Strip and 70 per cent of the West Bank with territorial continuity between the two areas.
15. Israel's annexation of circa 40 per cent of what currently is known as Area C of the West Bank, and which includes all Israeli settlements and the entire Jordan Valley area.

16. Israeli control over Jewish Jerusalem, including the Old City and the Holy Basin.
17. Palestinian refugees' loss of the right to return to Israel and a solution that must be implemented outside Israel's borders.
18. Israeli control over the border crossings and a demilitarized Palestinian state.
19. The Deal of the Century was tilted heavily towards Israel's interests. Were it to be used by the new Trump administration as a basis for renewed negotiations over a final peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, it would be difficult if not impossible for a Palestinian leadership to accept or implement it. In this case, the outside-in peace approach could reduce the obstacles posed by the Deal of the Century in three main ways:
20. A regional outside-in peace approach would help to resolve the issues related to Jerusalem, on which Israel and the Palestinians have not managed to agree in the past. The outside-in strategy could allow for an Arab-Israeli religious co-presence in Jerusalem's Holy Basin, comprised of Israel, the Palestinians, Jordan (whose presence in the Holy Basin is recognised through the peace agreement with Israel) and Saudi Arabia.
21. The arrangements related to a religious co-presence would be separate from the agreements around 'sovereignty', but, on a symbolic level, would be a useful complement.
22. A regional peace outside-in framework would be conducive to the achievement and formulation of funding and naturalisation arrangements for Palestinian refugees. It would extend the options from a binary agreement to rejection of Palestinians returning to areas currently under Israeli sovereignty.
23. The Deal of the Century does not meet Palestinian territorial demand for full sovereignty over the West Bank. An outside-in regional peace approach could extend the area of land provided to the Palestinians by replacing areas in the West Bank that potentially would have been allocated to them with equivalent areas, based on leasing agreements with neighbouring Arab states.
24. For example, like the leasing by Jordan of territory to Israel, as part of their 1994 peace agreement, Egypt and Jordan could lease territory to the Palestinians. The quid pro quo would be that the international community would provide those countries' struggling economies with financial support, for example, via direct aid, debt relief, or advantageous loans.

Questions for the UK government

1. Establishing sustainable security arrangements in the Gaza Strip and along its international borders are a pre-requisite for long-term regional stability and resumption of Arab-Israeli peace talks. What resources is the UK government willing to invest in achieving long-term security including, but not limited to, training post-war Palestinian police/security forces in the Gaza Strip; monitoring and supporting security arrangements across the Egypt-Gaza/Israel-Gaza international borders.
2. The long-term development of the Gaza Strip is critical for maintaining regional peace and stability. According to the UK House of Common's library, in 2023/24 the UK provided 100 million GBP in aid to the Occupied Palestinian Territories. None

was directed via Hamas. Would the UK government commit to providing direct aid and/or lead an international aid coalition to financially support the post-war reconstruction of the Gaza Strip? If so, how would it propose to distribute aid, especially given the recent ban Israel imposed on UNRWA?

3. What, if any, measures would the UK government take in collaboration with the US to expand the Abraham Accords as a means to achieve full Arab-Israeli normalisation via an 'outside-in' regional approach?

ENDS

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