Israeli-Palestinian Violence: Recurring Rounds and Deteriorating Dynamics

Critical Neighbors
Egypt, Jordan, and the Israeli-Palestinian Arena

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Nimrod Novik

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Critical Neighbors: Egypt, Jordan, and the Israeli-Palestinian Arena

Following another Israel-Gaza round of violence, it is worth noting the role of Jordan, Egypt, and the U.S. in trying to prevent the fighting, and Egypt’s success in ending it.

Below are four perspectives—Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian, and Egyptian—on the situation, each accentuating different dimensions of the latest military escalation between Israel and Gaza militants: from efforts to avert a crisis, to its characteristics, to early implications.

The opinions and proposals expressed in these pieces are only reflective of the respective authors’ opinions and do not necessarily reflect the policies or positions of Israel Policy Forum
An Israeli Perspective

A Perfect Storm: Security Challenges Meet Internal Crises

By Nimrod Novik

Israel at age 75 has yet to define its character and agenda. At home, it is struggling to balance its Jewish and democratic values and shield its democracy from an assault by a coalition of extremists seeking to remove legal constraints on the policy agendas of annexationists, Jewish supremacists, Haredim, and libertarians. Next door, failing to define its future vis-à-vis its Palestinian neighbors in Gaza and the West Bank, Israel is facing increasingly frequent rounds of violence in the former and galloping annexation of the latter. Both trends have already affected relations with recent normalizers and undermined prospects for further expanding Israel’s regional ties.

Below is one Israeli’s perspective on the latter two concerns: developments in the Palestinian and regional arenas.

Gaza First
Israel launched its 17th Gaza operation in under two decades on May 9 with the targeted assassination of senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad operatives in response to over 100 rockets fired at Israel just a week earlier. Dubbed Operation Shield and Arrow, to Israelis it served as a vivid reminder of the outstanding intelligence and operational capabilities of Israel’s security agencies, as well as of the price paid repeatedly by—and the admirable resilience of—residents of Israeli communities in close
proximity to the Gaza Strip. It also proved wrong assumptions by some third parties that Israel's internal political crises have weakened it militarily. However, with over 1000 rockets fired at Israeli population centers, this round of fighting also served as a reminder that the IDF alone cannot solve the Gaza problem; that such problems do not lend themselves to exclusively military solutions; and of the futility of the strategy embraced by successive Israeli governments of weakening the Palestinian Authority and thereby strengthening Hamas' control of the Strip and its standing in the West Bank.

While successive governments have refused to explore political or diplomatic alternatives to this 'more of the same' approach,¹ some politicians as well as security officials and experts are pushing for a substitute that reflects a mindset best summarized as "what has not been accomplished by force can be achieved by more force." This strategy's advocates argue for a major ground invasion of the Strip, with the objective of getting rid of its various armed terror groups "once and for all." It appears that memories of 18 years of a similarly futile effort in Lebanon (1982-2000), ending with a unilateral withdrawal that saw Hezbollah all but take over the country to the north of Israel, have thus far deterred Israeli leaders from repeating that mistake in the south. Indeed, detractors argue that, like in Lebanon, once Israel invades Gaza, it would have no exit strategy save for withdrawing unilaterally again, which would lead to an even more chaotic and belligerent reality.

The appointment of Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yoav Galant as minister of defense provided that macho mindset with a most potent promoter. He has already (justifiably) pushed for targeted assassinations of terror perpetrators to restore deterrence and for (unacceptably) moving forward with these targeted assassinations despite concerns of 'collateral damage' (which under his predecessors had been cause to abort such operations). A third, most troubling feature of his operational approach is his support for what is dubbed "a ground maneuver," which applies here to a Gaza ground invasion. One wonders if that has not yet happened due to the objections of those who have not forgotten the Lebanon experience, including a weaker yet risk-averse prime minister and the IDF top brass, or if the defense minister and the government are waiting for a more opportune moment.

Jerusalem: the Eternal Preamble
Although the recent round of fighting originated with PIJ firing rockets at Israel in reaction to the death from a prolonged hunger strike of one of its members, who was imprisoned in Israel, it came only weeks after Israel experienced a multi-front rocket attack. Coming from Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza, it was all Hamas’ doing, and it was all about Jerusalem. Moreover, the Jerusalem Day flag march, set to happen not long after Operation Shield and Arrow began, was provocatively routed through East Jerusalem's Palestinian neighborhoods. Given that the flag march had in previous years triggered a multi-front Israeli-Palestinian escalation, there were concerns that what began as an Israel-PIJ confrontation could take a major turn for the worst. Fortunately, an Israel-PIJ ceasefire preceded Jerusalem Day, and the march—while it featured ugly anti-Palestinian chanting and was followed by lead provocateur Minister Itamar Ben Gvir ascending the Temple Mount—triggered no major incidents, and a wider escalation did not materialize.

¹ For a suggested alternative, see Amnon Reshef, Nimrod Novik, “An Alternative Strategy for Israel in Gaza,” The Jerusalem Post, December 13, 2018
Recognizing the importance of Jerusalem’s holy shrines among Arabs and Muslims worldwide, Hamas has long sought to be acknowledged as their defender. In recent years, the convergence of the Jewish holiday of Passover with Islam’s Ramadan offered unique opportunities to make that point. Besides Hamas’ (and others’) agitation, two mutually reinforcing changes in Israel contributed to the explosiveness of those moments. First, Israeli Jewish religious customs are shifting—Haredi rabbis’ rulings against Jewish visits to the Temple Mount are being superseded by those national religious rabbis who encourage it. Second, Israel underwent political change when in order to bolster his election prospects, Prime Minister Netanyahu facilitated the election of Jewish supremacist parties and brought their leaders into his coalition, thus emboldening their messianic constituents. Both changes drove an erosion in the status quo on the Temple Mount, which had been best codified by the same Netanyahu a few years earlier: “Muslims pray, others visit.” The increasingly massive Jewish ascent to the Mount, as well as Jewish prayer, served Hamas (and others) in sounding alarms about Muslim access to Haram al-Sharif and its al-Aqsa mosque being under threat.

There is no place where the convergence of extremists on both sides triggers violence more than in Jerusalem, specifically on Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Indeed, in May 2021 under Netanyahu, such provocations triggered a multi-front escalation that lasted 11 days. A year later, the Bennett-Lapid government took steps to prevent it from recurring. Even though those proved insufficient and similar mistakes were made, clashes at the site were contained and did not trigger escalation with Gaza or on other fronts. Yet, as noted above, the convergence of the holidays last month saw multi-front violence erupt yet again.

The Bennett-Lapid government’s success in maintaining relative calm during the confluence of the holidays cannot be attributed to tactical differences in handling the situation. Indeed, it repeated the major error in failing to prevent Israeli police from entering the mosque and clashing with violent Palestinian youth barricaded therein, which produced troubling, offensive images that went viral on social media. Just as they did under Netanyahu (2021), under Bennett-Lapid (2022), and again under Netanyahu (2023), these clashes and images served Hamas’ (and other hostiles’) cries that “al-Aqsa is in danger.”

In trying to figure out why similar conduct by different Israeli governments yields very different results—multi-front violence in 2021 and 2023, but none in 2022—one might suggest that an Israeli government that is neither disrespectful of Muslim religious sensitivities nor perceived to be out to establish Jewish supremacy over Islam’s third holiest shrine deprives allegations of a Jewish takeover of al-Aqsa of any credibility. Consequently, bookended by two Netanyahu coalitions that conducted themselves in a manner that reinforced such suspicions, the Bennett-Lapid government projected a very different image with appropriate results.

Regional Players: “[Their] Mind Is Stuck on Wait and See”

Important developments that have little, if anything, to do with Israel have affected major regional shifts have also impacted Israel’s place in the region. These include the restoration of Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations, the upgrading of UAE-Iranian diplomatic relations, efforts to stabilize and possibly resolve the Yemen crisis, Syria’s reinstatement into the Arab League, and much more.

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2 From Autograph’s hit, “My Girlfriend’s Boyfriend Isn’t Me”
Nonetheless, Israel's conduct has also contributed to changes in the region's approach to normalization, both in terms of its pace and its scope. This has to do with perceived changes in three attributes:

**Internal Stability**
While the region used to view Israel as a stable and stabilizing force, it no longer does. With five consecutive election cycles failing to produce a durable government, and with the current unprecedented governance crisis, it no longer looks stable. Moreover, with extremist provocateurs, Jewish supremacists, and ultra-nationalist annexationists serving in high-level positions and corresponding fringe voices in society emboldened, it is no longer viewed as stabilizing either.

**Security Prowess**
Whatever the calculations that led to an uncharacteristically soft Israeli reaction to rockets fired at it from Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria in early April, that reaction must have reinforced trends detected by Israeli intelligence, whereby friends and foes alike concluded that internal instability undermined security potency. Such misperceptions were apparently nourished also by massive protests by IDF reservists against the government's assault on democratic values and institutions. As regional adversaries raised questions about the IDF's operational preparedness and resolve, attempts were made to push the envelope of challenges, as exemplified in early March by an unprecedented Hezbollah attempt to detonate a major explosive device deep in Israeli territory, or Iran's launch of an assault drone, which was shot down by the Israeli air force.

Whereas Israelis have no doubt about reservists' ability to decouple protest against the government's attempt to undo democracy from attending to security duties, one cannot expect regional adversaries to appreciate that distinction. Consequently, doubts about Israel's security preparedness endure.

**The U.S. Factor**
For many decades, Israel was rightly viewed as a potent advocate for third parties in Washington. Starting with Egypt’s President Sadat in the 1970s, many in the region and beyond have assumed that the road to Washington transits through Jerusalem.

Given its composition, policies, and statements, the current Netanyahu government is no longer viewed as an asset, but rather as a liability for friends who need help with the U.S. administration and Congress. For Israelis, whose prime minister is not perceived as fully inaugurated before being received at the White House, President Biden's refusal to issue the invitation and making his reluctance public was but the most visible manifestation of his disapproval of Netanyahu's conduct. Also indicative was the change in the nature of the administration's reaction to the recent Israeli military operation in Gaza. Whereas on similar occasions in the past Washington provided Israel with the time it needed to extract adequate cost from perpetrators—in May 2021 it took the administration 10 days before it called for an end to hostilities—this time both National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin made those phone calls early on the third day of fighting, with a sharper message coming from Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman the day after. Likewise, administration spokespersons have used harsher language than in the past, in reaction to Israeli settler violence, Minister Smotrich’s despicable statement on the Huwara pogrom, Ben Gvir’s provocations on Temple Mount, and most recently a government decision to violate a predecessor's
commitment to Washington regarding the vacated settlement of Horesh. Though such reactions have thus far been confined to words rather than deeds, regional allies old and new, much like adversaries, cannot miss the changing tone. In 2023, the U.S. administration is no fan of the current Israeli government.

The Crown Jewel: KSA

When forming his current coalition, Prime Minister Netanyahu placed normalization with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia among his four top priorities. For some observers, this ambitious objective seems detached from reality. The ‘new Riyadh’, which recently seems to have jettisoned adventurous regional policies and embraced a conciliatory, stabilizing approach, is certainly not ignorant of the dynamics enumerated above, which are at the root of current Abraham Accords signatories’ ‘wait and see’ attitude toward the Netanyahu coalition. Indeed, Riyadh seems unlikely to risk taking normalization steps only to witness irresponsible Israeli ministers and Knesset members ‘rewarding’ it with provocations in Jerusalem, thus exposing the kingdom to accusations that the Protector of Islam’s Two Holy Shrines forgot about the third.

All that notwithstanding, one might point out several changes in Riyadh’s attitude that are noteworthy. They represent both a greater interest in the Israeli-Palestinian arena as well as the kingdom’s limitations. Relevant players in the KSA seem more aware of the implications of instability in the Israeli-Palestinian arena for Saudi interests than before. Consequently, if in the past Riyadh was satisfied with generalities and was reluctant to bother with details, it now seems to have an interest in investing in a far more detailed understanding of realities and developments on the ground. However, the wish to better understand has yet to be translated into an appetite for getting involved.

Whereas a different Israeli government might seize upon these tentative changes, encourage them, and seek to build upon them, given present realities in Jerusalem, it stands to reason that all one can hope for is that this Saudi ‘wait, study, and see’ attitude is not reversed.

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Any assessment of the political and security dynamics in our region leads to one conclusion: the various parties have only short-term solutions to the myriad of strategic challenges. Over the past 14 years, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu deliberately employed all forms of tactical solutions to the most challenging political, security, and economic problems relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The most recent flare-up in Gaza vis-à-vis Islamic Jihad is a repetition of the same approach, reflecting lack of strategy in dealing with all issues related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. A quick review of past confrontations indicates that with the end of every round, the countdown to the next one starts. The lack of an effective approach to the problems posed by the Gaza Strip reflects a more serious deficiency in developing a strategy to address the bigger context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a whole.

The same tactical approach is also applied to the situation in Jerusalem and the West Bank. The Israeli approach to challenges there is also characterized by tactical calculations and short-term steps, while avoiding any serious endeavor to address root causes. Consequently, the end result is repeated rounds of flare-ups in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem, and sometimes inside Israel-proper as well. This approach is applied to all political, security, and economic issues, and also to the most
sensitive aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, e.g. the status quo on Haram al-Sharif/the Temple Mount.

Over the past few years, the convergence of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the Jewish holiday of Passover raised concerns over spiking tensions. Those concerns indeed materialized at various levels with upticks in violence. While next year there will be no such convergence, that is unfortunately no reason to expect a violence-free environment. With or without the convergence of these holidays, tensions over Haram al-Sharif/the Temple Mount and Jerusalem in general are becoming a norm, while efforts by all relevant parties are exerted to minimize tensions rather than eliminate the root causes.

Ahead of the month of Ramadan this year, two preemptive meetings involving the U.S., Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority were held. The concluding statements highlighted, among other things, that all sides agreed to preserve “the unchanged historical status quo” on the site and also noted that the parties acknowledged the “Hashemite custodianship/special role” over the holy sites. It is rather important to note that this statement fell short of addressing the root causes of friction and even failed to address the differences in interpretation of the status quo, which are causing the repeated tensions. Therefore, tensions on the site and beyond rose especially during the first two weeks of the holy month. The Israeli police used excessive force to evacuate activists and worshippers on April 5, which was followed by the firing of dozens of rockets from Gaza, with more coming from southern Lebanon and Syria. Those tensions were mitigated only as the Israeli government decided to refrain from harsh retaliations that would have otherwise ignited a much bigger, multi-front conflict.

In addition, through effective local coordination, the Israeli police refrained from further eviction of worshipers and activists who sought to stay overnight (a Muslim practice known as itikaf) on the site during the last two weeks of the month. Consequently, no further tensions were reported despite the high number of worshippers and activists visiting the site and staying overnight for the remainder of the month. In addition, the Israeli police and the security establishment as a whole also recommended closing the Haram al-Sharif/the Temple Mount to Jewish and other non-Muslim visitors during the last ten days of Ramadan. Despite the earlier tensions, the month ended peacefully with no major friction. But again, this was a tactical means to deal with a much larger and more profound problem.

It appears that applying a ‘constructive ambiguity’ approach to understandings reached, rather than addressing root causes—as was the case regarding the Aqaba and Sharm el-Sheikh understandings—kept this powder keg high on the agenda of extremists on both sides. The Aqaba and Sharm el-Sheikh statements agreeing to preserve the ‘unchanged historical status quo’ juxtaposed two conflicting positions without addressing obvious contradictions. Those statements described the status quo on Haram al-Sharif/the Temple Mount as ‘unchanged,’ which conforms with the Israeli right-wing claim, while at the same time highlighting the adverse Arab position demanding the ‘historic status quo’ to be restored. The reality is that since 2003, the historic status quo has changed significantly. Jewish visitations are no longer coordinated with the Waqf and the prohibition on Jewish prayer is no longer enforced. The 'constructive ambiguity' wording of these statements swept under the carpet the conflicting positions of Israel, Jordan, and the PA. This approach all but guarantees the recurrence of future waves of violence.
In addition to the security implications, moderate forces have been systematically undermined as a result of this shortsighted approach. This enabled radical organizations to agitate for violence, particularly among the youth, who joined the big crowds gathered in and around al-Aqsa during the holy month of Ramadan. Undermining the role of the Jordanian Waqf and the PA as forces of stability, moderation, and peace has proven, and will prove in the future, a prescription for trouble affecting all.

On a more strategic level, Israel's tactical approach for dealing with all these challenges not only fails to address root causes, but also undermines its partners for peace and security on the Palestinian side. Rounds of conflict and rising tensions boost radicals while undermining moderate forces. It is therefore imperative to replace such a short-sighted approach with engagement with real peace and security partners, while employing a strategic approach to common challenges. As reaching a two-state solution might not be achievable in the short term, a more profound and effective approach to addressing all those tensions in collaboration with the moderate Palestinian forces is warranted and long overdue.
An Egyptian Perspective

by Hesham Youssef

Since the efforts of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to achieve peace ended unsuccessfully in 2014, the Israeli-Palestinian situation witnessed major developments, including a peace plan by President Donald Trump, the Abraham Accords, five Israeli elections, a canceled Palestinian election and countless failures to achieve intra-Palestinian reconciliation, numerous wars and military clashes, recurring tensions and confrontations in Jerusalem, and much more. In dealing with many of these developments, the question raised most frequently remained unchanged and unanswered: now what?

Almost six months after the establishment of the most extreme right-wing government in Israel’s 75-year history, and with the failure to avoid confrontations in Jerusalem and continued military confrontations with Gaza, this question gained additional urgency and a higher level of importance.

The Challenges of Unanswered Questions

The reason the question of “now what” has yet to be answered stems from five fundamental unresolved issues:
1. **Is the two-state solution dead, and have we crossed the tipping point of achieving that objective?**

The answer from a significant and growing number of experts is yes—the tipping point has been crossed and the two-state solution is dead. Many of them have already started examining alternatives for the two-state solution, including the one-state option, varying ideas of confederation models, and more. The current Netanyahu government opposes the two-state solution and its program makes its position clear by arguing for a zero-sum end-game that ensures full Israeli control over the entire land. In its founding coalition agreement, it clearly stipulates that “the Jewish people have an exclusive and inalienable right to all parts of the Land of Israel.”

Conversely, except for Israel, all the countries associated with the conflict, far and near, persistently and consistently support the two-state solution, although a number of them privately express doubt about its feasibility. There is also an agreement, except for Israel once again, that the status quo is unsustainable, but there is no agreement on what can be done to prevent the next crisis or how to deal with it except through the current firefighting approach that reduces the conflict’s repercussions but is gradually losing effectiveness. There is also no answer on how to achieve the two-state solution, how to agree on a political horizon, or how to exert pressure for or otherwise bring about the resumption of negotiations.

2. **If the two-state solution remains the north star, can it be preserved, or can settlement activity and annexation (once creeping, now galloping) be reversed, or at least stopped?**

When Israel decided to legalize nine outposts that had been illegally built in the occupied territories, in violation of Israeli law, and turn them into recognized settlements, it generated a rare joint statement of opposition from the U.S., Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy. And when it approved plans and building permits for 10,000 new housing units—an unprecedented number to be approved at one time—the Palestinians decided to push for a U.N. Security Council resolution to confront this settlement expansion. The U.S. objected. The maximum that the Palestinians could achieve was a Security Council Presidential Statement expressing deep concern and dismay over Israel’s announcement of further construction and expansion of settlements, as well as the “legalization” of settlement outposts.

It must be noted, however, that even when the Obama administration abstained and allowed the Security Council to adopt resolution 2334 in 2016, which demanded that Israel “immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and that it fully respect all of its legal obligations in this regard,” it did not translate into meaningful changes on the ground.

At the same time, Israeli policies that are in clear violation of international law continue unabated, including various types of collective punishment such as punitive home demolitions and sweeping movement restrictions in the wake of violence perpetrated by individuals. Ministers Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich have also expressed a desire to see the Land of Israel without “Arabs,” whom they believe should no longer be welcome as Israeli citizens.
In this environment, the international community continues to stress the need to preserve the two-state solution, yet it fails to take the necessary steps to achieve this objective, including confronting continued settlement expansion and annexation steps.

3. **Will the international community effectively address the situation in Jerusalem, especially surrounding al-Aqsa Mosque, which has been a source of recurring tensions amid the erosion of the status quo under successive Israeli governments?**

Al-Aqsa Mosque has been and remains an issue that can ignite violence in a blink of an eye. In light of provocations from extremist ministers in the current government, this is exactly what happened. Minister Ben Gvir leads a party whose platform calls for exclusive Israeli sovereignty over and ownership of the al-Aqsa compound. He argues that banning Jewish prayer there constitutes racism against Jews, contradicting the status quo understanding that was agreed upon by Israel.

The U.S. supported Egypt and Jordan in playing the role of “firefighters”—a role that had mixed results. These efforts mostly concerned the confluence of Ramadan and Passover in the past three years. However, no real effort has been undertaken to address the eroding status quo more broadly and other issues in East Jerusalem, including evictions of Palestinians, demolitions of Palestinian houses, and increasing attacks by Israeli extremists against Christians.

4. **How will the international community deal with the possible breakdown of the Palestinian Authority?**

The [Palestinian Authority](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palestinian_Authority) has lost legitimacy among Palestinians and is losing control over parts of the West Bank. Hamas remains in control of Gaza, with no prospect of Fatah-Hamas reconciliation in sight. The quality of the PA's state building efforts has varied tremendously since its emergence in the 1990s. A little over a decade ago, reports by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the U.N. stated that the PA had begun to build the core functions of a state and was ready for independence. However, the PA is currently at its lowest level of popularity since its establishment due to poor performance, corruption, authoritarianism, and inefficacy in its efforts to end the occupation. Indeed, the widespread perception among Palestinians is that the PA and its security forces are subcontractors of the Israeli occupation, enabling and facilitating Israel's control over Palestinians.

Today, the breakdown of the PA is no longer a theoretical possibility, but a real threat to stability in the occupied territories. The international community is not exerting enough effort to prevent this from happening and does not have a plan to address the repercussions if it does happen.

5. **Will double standards continue to be the approach in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?**

Double standards are not new in foreign policy. They have long been a part of the international political scene, and all nations are guilty of employing them depending on their interests. To the Palestinians, the manner in which the U.S. and the West have dealt with the war in Ukraine and how they celebrated Ukrainian resistance against Russia reflects a double standard in relation to their own cause and raises questions as to whether the U.S. and its allies can effectively play the role of a broker in the Israeli-Palestinian context.

The level of support for Ukraine, which is enabling it to continue to confront Russia, is a clear reflection of how the mobilization of political will can be instrumental in determining the path of the war on the ground.
It is not that the Palestinians are demanding or are expecting a similar level of support to that of Ukraine, but they are left dismayed at the huge discrepancy between the tepid international political will to address their aspiration for a state (a goal that remains consistent with U.S. policy) and the strong political will to support Ukrainians as their sovereignty and independence are threatened. The question then becomes whether it is even possible to foster greater international will in favor of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sadly, it seems that this is not, and it is not clear when the will to do so might emerge.

Is There a Way Out?
Peace efforts have been at an impasse many times before. At this moment, however, the challenge is different for multiple reasons. Israel has the most extreme government in its history, the PA is suffering from its worst legitimacy crisis since its establishment, the Arab and European countries are overwhelmed with numerous other pressing priorities, and the U.S. is both reducing its footprint in the region and unwilling to invest political capital in the conflict as it sees that the chances of success are low. Furthermore, the separation paradigm that governed the approach to resolving the conflict is falling apart as more people are questioning its viability and/or desirability, with polls of young people suggesting that majorities of both Israelis and Palestinians believe that violence is the best way to achieve concessions from the other side.

At the same time, the U.S. and several Western countries continue to oppose nonviolent Palestinian efforts to put pressure on Israel in order to end the occupation, including appealing to the ICJ and the ICC. This recently recurred when the Palestinians resorted to the UNGA to request an advisory opinion from the ICJ on the legal consequences of Israel’s “occupation, settlement and annexation... including measures aimed at altering the demographic composition, character, and status of the Holy City of Jerusalem, and from its adoption of related discriminatory legislation and measures.”

Such a moment requires the international community to act to mitigate the factors that are pushing the conflict in a dangerous and untenable direction.

An Arab “Can-Do” Approach Can Go a Long Way
Despite their preoccupation with other priorities, Arab countries recognize the centrality of this conflict and that they are arguably the ones with the most at stake beyond the parties themselves. There are ongoing efforts by Saudi Arabia, the EU, and the Arab League to reinvigorate the Arab Peace Initiative. The Munich Group, consisting of Egypt, Jordan, Germany, and France, continues its efforts to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace, despite not being able to meet with the Israeli and Palestinian foreign ministers and the lack of progress in implementing the confidence-building measures that they had asked the parties to undertake. Another significant path that did not materialize is for the new normalizers to use their newly acquired leverage to advance the prospects for peace.

Arab countries should be prepared for heavy lifting. They need to adopt a two-track approach. The first would provide proposals to both sides for a gradual return to a political process within a specific timeframe. This track could include incentives for Israel as progress advances. The second would convey possible consequences that would raise the price of occupation and human rights violations if progress is not achieved, including how this would impact bilateral relations with Israel.
Arab countries should not wait for more devastating crises and should send a message to the Israeli people that they understand their aspiration to maintain their Jewish character, but that Israelis should also understand that Palestinians will never surrender, forgo their national aspirations, or accept being second-class citizens in a one-state option. The Palestinians should also find a way to hold elections as a path towards reconciliation, achieve good governance, and end the current trend towards authoritarianism.

If the current separation paradigm fails, this will not augur well for Israel’s goals of preserving its Jewish character and advancing its democratic values, nor for the Palestinians who yearn to achieve their national aspirations—let alone for the stability and prosperity of the region. The U.S. should recognize that firefighting is not an effective approach towards peace, and much more can be achieved without a substantial political investment.

The current impasse is probably one of the most challenging that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has endured for years. Millions have reached the point of despair and now is the time for action and for wise minds to choose a more promising path.
The First Impulse
The first impulse in Amman towards Netanyahu's sixth government reflected concerns that Israel-Jordan bilateral relations were approaching a new critical juncture, with direct consequential implications for Jordan's national security. After five months in power, the initial assessment remains valid. The collision between Israel's political and security echelons has disrupted the norms that had governed Israel-Jordan relations since they were established in 1994 and has produced trends within the Israeli security establishment that are likely to stay. This was evident in the aftermath of the Aqaba meeting aimed at preventing an escalation during Ramadan, where Jordan failed to read the extent to which internal dynamics first, impacted Israel's ability to meet negotiated commitments, and second, narrowed agreements with Israel on certain policies to the merit of the issue at hand rather than considering them in the broader context of regional security, thus limiting Jordan's leverage over Israeli policymaking.

While a full-fledged escalation was avoided, the risk to Jordan's national security remains imminent. Therefore, as Jordan may seek to reconsider its security assumptions, it should attempt to create as informed a picture of the current and emerging security environment as possible. This threat picture must factor in the new regional dynamics and assess the wide range of options that Jordan could
exploit before jeopardizing the strategic peace with Israel. The smartest approach for Jordan is to continue its preventive diplomacy while simultaneously finding ways to transform its soft power into a magnetic force that draws regional players to its goals, including protecting Jordan from threats posed by Israel's internal dynamics.

What Happened in Aqaba Stayed in Aqaba
The Aqaba meeting had two main objectives. The short-term one was to restore calm ahead of the holy month of Ramadan and prevent a rerun of the May 2021 scenario, when the 11 days of escalation threatened to sow chaos across the Middle East. The other, long-term objective was to build on de-escalation for progress toward preparing a climate conducive to resume peace talks between Palestinians and Israelis and achieve lasting peace based on a two-state solution. The avoidance of a full-fledged escalation in 2022 provided invaluable lessons to Amman, despite the mistakes that were made.

In February 2023, Jordan successfully engineered a Palestinian-Israeli meeting after decades of suspended talks. The meeting took place under the auspices of the United States. Assistant Secretary of State Barbara Leaf and National Security Council Middle East Coordinator Brett McGurk participated in the meeting. Egypt, which coordinated closely with Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman al-Safadi and head of intelligence Ahmad Husni, was represented by its head of intelligence, Abbas Kamel. The Palestinian delegation included Secretary of the Executive Committee of the PLO Hussein al-Sheikh, the head of the Palestinian General Intelligence Service, Majed Faraj, and the diplomatic advisor to President Mahmoud Abbas, Majdi al-Khalidi. Israel’s National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi and Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar attended on the Israeli side.

During the meeting, both Palestinians and Israelis affirmed commitments to respect all previous agreements, including recognizing the importance of upholding the historic status quo at the holy sites in Jerusalem (in word and practice) and emphasizing the importance of the Hashemite custodianship in that regard. They also committed to end unilateral measures for a period of three to six months. This included an Israeli commitment to stop discussion of any new settlement units for four months and to stop the legalization of any new outposts for six months.

Moreover, both affirmed the necessity of committing to de-escalation on the ground and to prevent further violence through several confidence-building measures. Further details and assessing progress were left to be discussed the following month in the Egyptian city of Sharm el-Sheikh, including the establishment of a joint civilian committee that would work to promote economic confidence-building measures for the PA. On an operational level, there was an agreement on a number of measures, including the Israeli police refraining from entering Jerusalem's al-Qibli (al-Aqsa) Mosque, preventing Jewish visitation on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in the last ten days of Ramadan, and that itikaf (Muslim overnight presence) would be limited to Fridays and Saturdays of the month, in addition to the last ten days of Ramadan.

To increase prospects for a successful meeting, Jordan had engaged all parties for months in an extensive diplomatic effort calling on the international community to share the burden in de-escalating tensions in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. The Jordanian message focused on the threats to a rules-based world order and the need to protect al-Aqsa Mosque/Haram al-Sharif and support the
Hashemite custodianship of the Jerusalem holy sites. The response of the international community to the Jordanian endeavor was expressed in four UNSC emergency sessions held over Jerusalem.

While the meeting was in the preparation phase, it already generated controversy. A number of Jordanian activists and parties condemned the Aqaba meeting, claiming that it would jeopardize Jordan’s national security for its engagement with an Israeli “fascist” government that is committed to undermining Jordan’s custodianship over Jerusalem holy sites. To participants’ dismay, within hours of releasing the meeting’s communiqué, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (who had given his consent to the joint declaration) tweeted that “the building and authorization [of settlements in the West Bank] will continue according to the original planning and building schedule, with no change. There is not and will not be any freeze.” Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich echoed Netanyahu’s statement. Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir dismissed the importance of the meeting, saying that what happened in Jordan would stay in Jordan. Meanwhile, hundreds of Israeli settlers in the West Bank went on a rampage in Huwara, avenging the killing of two Israelis by a Palestinian gunman days after an Israeli raid in Nablus killed 11 Palestinians.

Despite domestic pressure, and despite contradictory and provocative statements by Israeli officials, Jordan remained committed to the outcome of Aqaba, betting on the reliability of the Israeli security establishment to influence the prime minister’s decision-making, at least when it comes to respecting the agreed de-escalation measures. On the first Friday of Ramadan, Israel lived up to expectations as 280,000 Palestinians visited al-Aqsa, a record number since 1986. However, the picture changed dramatically on the night of April 5, when the Israeli police blundered by storming al-Qibli Mosque.

The climate was already primed for confrontation. Jewish and Islamist extremists had been leading incitement campaigns in preparation for the holy month of Ramadan and Passover. The Temple Mount movements invited activists to sacrifice goats at the compound and distributed flyers around the Old City advertising their intentions in Arabic. Hamas also led a campaign under the title “al-Aqsa is in danger,” calling upon all Palestinians to practice itikaf during the entire month of Ramadan, in contradiction to the Waqf’s decision to limit it to Fridays and Saturdays and the last ten days in Ramadan.

According to a statement by the Israeli police, it received a report that a number of Palestinians had barricaded themselves inside the mosque with the intention of attacking Jewish visitors the next morning. Accordingly, the police decided to storm al-Qibli. The situation quickly escalated, and it took no time until images of bound and tied Palestinians lying face down and then lined up went viral. These images were seen by millions of Muslims around the world, including in Amman, where the images were described as painful and humiliating. A number of protests took the streets throughout Jordan and a demonstration was held in front of the Israeli embassy compound in al-Rabeah calling on the authorities to expel the Israeli ambassador and annul the peace treaty. Jordan and the Waqf also came under a vicious campaign that accused them of being complicit in dividing the compound. The Waqf responded by accusing the Israeli police of violating what had been agreed upon, issuing a statement condemning the storming of the mosque and stating that itikaf would take place during the whole month of Ramadan. To make things worse, and in a dynamic similar to that of 2021, Hamas retaliated against the Israeli police storming al-Qibli by firing rockets from Gaza and, in a significant escalation, a barrage of nearly three dozen rockets from Lebanon and a few from Syria. These allowed
Hamas to present itself (yet again) as a “shield and a sword” of al-Aqsa Mosque and the Palestinian people, and for a third time in a row, Jordan's diplomatic efforts had failed.

**We Are Here to “Administer, Not Liberate.”**

Within this context, the level of frustration rose in Amman, as demonstrated by the frequency and tone of Jordanian officials’ comments on the issue. The Jordanian Foreign Ministry issued 11 statements and tweets condemning and criticizing Israel's policy of violating the sanctity of the holy site. In coordination with Egypt and the PA, Jordan initiated an emergency meeting of the Arab League and of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. It also pushed for a U.N. Security Council meeting on the situation in Jerusalem in coordination with the UAE. During a CNN interview, Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman al-Safadi stated that Israel didn’t respect what it had agreed upon in Aqaba and said that its practices were pushing everyone to the abyss of violence, making it difficult for the Jordanians to continue to engage with Israel. He also accused Israel of undermining the peace treaty with Jordan and with other Arab countries and putting the implementation of regional integration plans at risk.

In an Al Jazeera interview, Safadi also expressed deep frustration with those who criticized Jordan's endeavors, stating that Jordan alone can't end the occupation and clarifying that the Waqf’s role in al-Aqsa is to “administer, not to liberate.” He stressed that Jordan has always acted within the Arab consensus, and when that consensus opted for war, Jordan fought and sacrificed martyrs, while when it opted for negotiations, the country signed peace with the Palestinians’ interest in mind. Safadi later called for skeptics to envision the alternative in the absence of the Jordanian custodianship. It was also reported that Safadi refused to receive Israeli messages delivered by the U.S. and the UAE, claiming Israel was lying about what was happening at the mosque and stressing that Israel should commit to stop its violations of the status quo at the compound.

Following these frictions, the Israeli police refrained from raiding the mosque and prevented non-Muslim visitors from entering the compound during the last nine days of Ramadan, sealing a calm conclusion to this highly tense episode, and resulting in more than a quarter of a million Muslim celebrating Laylat al-Qadr without any serious incident.

**It’s Not Over Yet**

On May 2, the Palestinian prisoner Khader Adnan died in an Israeli prison after nearly three months on a hunger strike. Adnan, who was protesting his six-year detention in Israeli custody without trial, had become over the years a symbol of steadfastness in the face of Israel’s occupation. Palestinian Islamic Jihad avenged the death of Adnan with a barrage of rocket fire launched at Israel, to which the IDF responded with an assassination campaign against the group in Gaza, Operation Shield and Arrow. During the five days of the operation beginning on May 9, 33 Palestinians were killed, including six PIJ leaders, and in a similar pattern to 2021, at least six children were killed. On the Israeli side, one Israeli was killed, as was one Palestinian laborer from Gaza who was inside Israel.

The security operation concluded with a ceasefire mediated by Egypt. The Egyptian officials worked under pressure to avoid a scenario in which the fighting would continue until the Jerusalem Day flag march scheduled for May 18. The Egyptians feared that it would be much harder to stop the escalation and it would be likely that “Hamas will ride this wave and join as well.” In 2021, amid weeks of unrest in Jerusalem, Netanyahu's government changed the route of the flag march at the last minute to avoid the Muslim Quarter, but it was too late to prevent clashes between Israeli police and
Palestinians at Haram al-Sharif. The violence at the site led Hamas to fire a barrage of rockets at Jerusalem, sparking May's 2021 war. In 2022, under the Bennett-Lapid government, thousands of Israeli religious nationalists paraded through Muslim parts of the Old City of Jerusalem. The provocative march sparked violence, but mostly without major incidents largely thanks to the adoption of a number of measures that averted escalation. This year, Netanyahu instructed that the Jerusalem Day flag march proceed as planned—that is, along its traditional route through the Old City’s Muslim Quarter. On May 21, thousands of Israeli nationalists paraded through the heart of Jerusalem's Old City in a show of force, among them was Itamar Ben Gvir. Jordan condemned Ben Gvir’s storming of al-Aqsa Mosque and warned that the provocative and escalating march could make things deteriorate further.

Although the conclusion of these events (Ramadan and Passover, the recent ceasefire agreement between Israel and Palestinian armed groups, flag march) have created a perception that a wider military confrontation has been averted, the climate is still charged for ignition. We can count on the complex nature of this conflict reconstructing old and new dynamics that will continue to converge into a point of fatigue and further escalation without increasing any group’s security. It’s hard, for example, to imagine how the ongoing Israeli operation in Nablus (launched earlier this month to avenge the Dee family murders) will not accelerate violence, or how the killing of two Palestinians from Balata refugee camp, who according to the Israeli military were not the wanted suspects that the troops had sought to arrest, will not spark vengeance against Israel. There is also the Armenian scandal, which prompted Jordan and Palestine to announce their decision to suspend their recognition of Patriarch Manougian, and the rise of targeted attacks against Palestinian Christians will likely add another layer of complexity to the conflict. The hard question from a Jordanian point of view becomes then how to mitigate the escalatory trends driven by Netanyahu's coalition calculations and insulate Jordan's security from its consequences.

Lesson Learned: Leverage the Arabic Depth
Although a full-fledged escalation was avoided, the dynamics of April 5 demonstrated a trend in Jordan-Israel relations that will likely continue to threaten Jordan's national security. Jordan must revisit its security assumptions about the reliability of Israel as a strategic security partner on the issues that matter to Jordan the most, like Jerusalem and annexation. Jordan must understand that Israeli internal dynamics will limit agreement with Jordan to specific issues at hand, as opposed to broader strategic cooperation on regional security based on a range of shared concerns. Consequently, this will limit Jordan's leverage over Israeli policy making. To mitigate the risk of this trend, Jordan must assess global and regional dynamics and seek to exploit opportunities to consolidate its interests.

The geopolitical competition between the great powers, which is taking place during a “decisive decade,” has created dynamics that are already felt in the region. First, an American openness for its allies and partners to take on more of the heavy lifting and share the security burden of challenges that the United States cannot ignore or handle on its own. However, as U.S. allies and partners are wary of hitching themselves too closely to Washington in areas that would not serve their national interest or their perception of threat (like OPEC +), the U.S. appears intent on mitigating the risks of dealignment by accepting the choice of its partners to not take sides as long as the international order is preserved.
The second dynamic is the desire by regional players to de-escalate tensions and focus inward by pursuing local solutions to local problems, whether in the form of regional economic and trading arrangements or in locally negotiated solutions to political disputes. The Saudi–Iranian rapprochement is a recent example; Saudi Arabia, which seems to adopt a zero-problems policy to achieve its ambitious economic reforms and social programs, and Iran, which wants to escape its economic stagnation and diversify its options in the absence of the JCPOA, are pursuing bilateral relations. Though it’s too early to predict whether the rapprochement between the two regional powers will hold once put into test, it reflects the favorable strategic direction of these players, at least in the short term.

These dynamics have opened the door for a proactive regional and international engagement that is being translated into the creation/reactivation of a number of platforms that aspire to achieve security and stability in the region. The trilateral meeting that brought the EU, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab League together agreed to create a working group that will develop proposals to coordinate efforts to encourage the parties to demonstrate—through policies and actions—their commitment to a two-state solution. There were also reports about the Munich Quartet's interest in supporting the Aqaba meeting and taking measures that would create a realistic horizon for the resumption of a credible political process and the attainment of a just and lasting peace.

Within this context, Jordan must flex its diplomatic muscle to the fullest and benefit from the new vibe in the region. Jordan must start by analyzing the existing platforms like those mentioned above, in addition to others like the Negev Forum and I2U2, with the purpose of identifying which could be most effectively leveraged to de-escalate tensions for the short term and improve prospects for creating a political horizon, expand economic integration, and deepen security cooperation for the longer term. In practical terms, the Aqaba meeting should be a constant address that could be linked to any platform. The Aqaba meeting already succeeded in laying a realistic roadmap towards de-escalation and the resumption of a credible political horizon. To eliminate unnecessary duplication within regional and international efforts, partners should build on what has been achieved in Aqaba, adding the missing regional and international political capital to pressure and incentivize both sides to commit to de-escalation. However, Jordan must recognize the Saudis’ weight as the region's center of gravity. The Saudis (in their capacity at the various platforms) could participate at the next Aqaba/Sharm meeting and contribute to the economic confidence-building measures that may eventually serve their new rail project on the one hand and offer Israelis with a potent incentive on the other.

Indeed, at a time when the composition, statements, policies, and initiatives of the Israeli government seem to have triggered unprecedented internal opposition and soul-searching, a declared Saudi intention to host the next meeting on their soil once Israel is prepared to commit to the Arab Peace Initiative (API) might provide the Israeli public and political elites with some serious challenges to contemplate.

Given its credibility, history, and strategic location, when Israelis finally make up their mind and choose to join the regional de-escalation club, Jordan will be there to both steer its bilateral relations with Israel away from conflict minefields and to facilitate such a new chapter in regional realignment.
About the Authors

Nimrod Novik

Nimrod Novik is Israel Policy Forum’s Israel fellow. The former senior advisor on foreign policy to the late Shimon Peres, Novik is currently a senior associate at the Economic Cooperation Foundation (ECF) and is a member of the Executive Committee at Commanders for Israel’s Security (CIS). In addition to Israeli security and political circles, Novik maintains close contacts with the Egyptian intelligence community, Jordanian security establishment, Palestinian political leadership, and Saudi security experts, as well as with senior U.S., European, U.N., and other relevant officials dealing with Middle East policy.

Ibrahim Eid Dalalsha

Ibrahim Eid Dalalsha is a senior political consultant based in the West Bank. Currently, he heads a private think tank in Ramallah, the Horizon Center for Political Studies and Media Outreach. Mr. Dalalsha’s former role as senior political advisor at the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem spanned two decades. He has been named the State Department’s Foreign Service National of the Year for outstanding political analysis and reporting and extraordinary networking and outreach three times throughout his career. Dalalsha has played an integral role in peace negotiations across the Middle East, including the 2014 ceasefire negotiations held in Cairo, in addition to other initiatives in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Farah Bdour

Farah has been the programs director at the Amman Center for Peace and Development (ACPD) since 2012. ACPD is a Jordanian think tank that engages in innovative, relevant, high-quality research and provides policy analysis and recommendations to decision makers, public leaders, and the strategic community, both in Jordan and abroad. She has served as the director of Seeds of Peace Program in Jordan since 2015. Seeds of Peace is an American NGO that works to equip exceptional youth and educators with the skills and relationships to work in solidarity across lines of difference to create more just and inclusive societies. She is also part of the Middle East training team at Bosserman Center for Conflict Resolution at Salisbury University, one of the largest academic, practice, and research-based centers in the U.S. that provides innovative and impactful training at the local, national, and international levels for graduate and undergraduate students. Farah is a certified mediator who writes reports about current regional conflicts and has been published in numerous research institute journals.

Hesham Youssef

Ambassador Hesham Youssef was a career diplomat with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Egypt. From 2014 to 2019, he served as assistant Secretary General for Humanitarian, Cultural, and Social Affairs of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and completed his term in July 2019. From
2001 to 2014, he served as a senior official in the Arab League, as official spokesman and later the chief of staff to Secretary General Amr Moussa from 2003 to 2011. From 2012 to 2014, Ambassador Youssef was a senior advisor to Secretary General of the Arab League Dr. Nabil Elaraby on issues pertaining to crisis management and the reform of the Arab League.