

MIDDLE EAST INITIATIVE

Overcoming Barriers to Resolving Gaza and Beyond

James K. Sebenius



HARVARD Kennedy School
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YEARS
OF RESEARCH, POLICY,
AND LEADERSHIP

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Established in 1998, the Middle East Initiative (MEI) is Harvard University's principal forum for policy-relevant research and teaching on the contemporary Middle East and North Africa. MEI convenes policymakers, scholars, and intellectuals from the region and beyond to expand our understanding of this complex part of the world and to contribute to the search for solutions to its most pressing policy challenges. Through the integration of scholarly research, policy analysis, executive and graduate education, and community engagement, MEI aims to advance public policy and build capacity in the Middle East to enhance the lives of all the region's peoples.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
A Discredited Israeli Strategy and the Need for Complementary, Longer-term Approach	4
The Arab-Israeli-Palestinian Peace Initiative (“AIPPI”)	7
Potential Appeal of the AIPPI to Key Involved Parties	9
Daunting barriers to realization of the AIPPI	11
A five-part sketch of how key barriers to realizing the AIPPI might be surmounted	13
1. Quiet diplomatic initiatives to “sell” the AIPPI to regional players, Israelis and Palestinians	13
2. Induce explicit Israeli support for key features of the AIPPI	14
3. Strengthen the Palestinian Authority	20
4. Gain Israeli commitments to avoiding civilian casualties, greater Gaza aid, and, over time the AIPPI endgame.....	22
5. Gain regional support to oppose Hamas diplomatically, revive normalization, and formulate post-war initiatives.....	23
The Promise and Peril of a Phased Approach to the AIPPI	26



An Israeli soldier walks by a house destroyed in fighting with by Hamas militants in kibbutz Be'eri on Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2023. The kibbutz was overrun by Hamas militants from the nearby Gaza Strip Saturday when they killed and captured many Israelis. (AP Photo/Baz Ratner)



Introduction

As of early January 2024, discussion of the Gaza war heavily focuses on its humanitarian costs, cease fire possibilities, hostage prospects, and “day after” options. Yet what longer-term strategy guides actions on these vital issues while offering a more positive vision for Israelis, Palestinians, and key regional players? This paper sketches such a vision and strategy, but far more importantly, highlights the formidable barriers to its realization—and the elements of a realistic path to overcoming those barriers. With old political assumptions jolted by recent events, an opening exists for a new and better regional reality to take shape.

With old political assumptions jolted by recent events, an opening exists for a new and better regional reality to take shape

The past Israeli approach to the Palestinians and the region has failed. On October 7, Hamas seized the strategic initiative and Israel remains in reactive mode. **The current war in Gaza has a primarily short- to medium-term focus that entails substantial risks, especially if fighting remains Israel’s dominant effort without a longer-term political and diplomatic approach to the Palestinians.** These risks include an isolated Israel not integrated into the region, most Palestinians further from their national aspirations, and Israel’s main backers bearing substantial diplomatic costs. Under this “primarily military” scenario, Palestinian radicalization will increase as will regional sympathy for their plight. Simmering violence in the West Bank¹ and Gaza with episodic outbursts will continue indefinitely. And Israel will indefinitely act to suppress them.

Sketched here as an “Arab-Israeli-Palestinian Peace Initiative”

This paper argues for an alternative path that would explicitly complement Israel’s war effort with a longer-term, positive vision

and strategy. Sketched here as an “Arab-Israeli-Palestinian Peace Initiative (AIPPI),” this approach includes Israeli, Palestinian,

¹ This paper will use the term “West Bank” in an attempt to neutrally refer to the region variously called the Territories, the Palestinian Territories, the Occupied Territories, Palestine, Judea and Samaria, etc..

regional, US, and global components. This alternative “military plus diplomatic and political” scenario promises to lead—on a phased basis, over time—to a unified West Bank and Gaza under a revitalized Palestinian Authority, meaningful steps toward two states living in peace and security, and normalized political, economic, and security relationships between Israel and its regional neighbors. Relative to the risks of a primarily military strategy, the AIPPI would offer considerable advantages to Israelis, Palestinians, regional Sunni powers, as well as the United States and the Western backers of Israel.

Moreover, credibly articulating an AIPPI strategy and taking actions toward implementing it *sooner rather than later* would enhance the otherwise dim prospects of a multilateral response to the security, rebuilding, and governance challenges of post-conflict Gaza—as well as boosting the chances of further normalization between Israel and its Sunni regional neighbors. Such an articulation and actions would also enable broader-based efforts to strengthen the Palestinian Authority, which should play increasingly important roles in implementing the AIPPI. By contrast, failure to commit to a positive vision such as the AIPPI, each of these desirable outcomes would become far less likely.

A distinctive focus of this paper is to highlight and address some of the truly daunting barriers [to the Peace Initiative].

Of course, **simply articulating a positive, longer-term vision like the AIPPI is relatively easy as many similar proposals attest. That is why a distinctive focus of this paper is to highlight and address some of the truly daunting barriers in many quarters that would block the AIPPI, especially those that would prevent this initiative even from being advanced by major Israeli figures, let alone realized in practice.** While Israel’s commitment would ultimately be pivotal to bring this initiative to life, getting Israel on board calls for a sequential approach by the United States and key regional parties as described in the final section of this paper. Such efforts are partially underway now and should be intensified. Relative to Israel’s current approach that is primarily military, this AIPPI strategy offers the promise, over time, of overcoming the formidable barriers to the AIPPI en route to a more stable, just, and integrated Middle East.



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, left, meets with Qatari Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani in Amman, Jordan, Saturday, Nov. 4, 2023. (Jonathan Ernst/Pool Photo via AP)

The AIPPI can only work in phases, or in stages, over time: as Israelis become more confident that their security concerns on the West Bank can be met and that regional normalization is the credible “reward” for embrace of the AIPPI, as the Palestinians come to believe in a genuine Israeli acceptance of a political horizon for their aspirations and progress toward realizing them, and as regional powers see these Israeli and Palestinian convictions as real. Yet, as necessary and valuable is this kind of phased approach, it also opens the door to would-be spoilers of all kinds who view the AIPPI as inimical to their interests: Israeli far right-wingers, Palestinian rejectionists, and Iranian-influenced parties in the region who fear regional integration of Israel with Sunni states, and repudiate the very existence of the state of Israel. Overcoming these potential spoilers requires acceptance of the end-state of the AIPPI and ongoing efforts to build a winning coalition in its support.

A Discredited Israeli Strategy and the Need for Complementary, Longer-term Approach

The pre-Gaza war Israeli strategic concept might cynically be described as “*regional integration with a Palestinian footnote*.” This meant the progressive regional integration of Israel into a de facto block of Sunni Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, KSA, UAE, and other Gulf monarchies) that collectively oppose direct and indirect Iranian influence. This approach would have largely bypassed the Palestinians, episodically “mowing the grass” as Hamas mounted attacks on Israel from Gaza, while seeking to advance normalization with the KSA and others that would have complemented the current Abraham Accords. Indeed, Israeli policy tacitly boosted Hamas, hoping that it would moderate, while consistently undermining the Palestinian Authority (PA). Significant elements of the current Israeli government would concurrently proceed with *de facto* or *de jure* annexation of the West Bank.

Then came the Hamas attack on October 7, which vividly demonstrated the bankruptcy of this prewar strategic concept; at a minimum Israel can’t ignore the Palestinians and “manage” Gaza without dire consequences.

While Israel’s prior strategy has been discredited, no new longer-term vision has taken its place. Rather, wartime imperatives now dominate Israeli actions and discourse: respond to Hamas terrorism by “destroying Hamas” or at least dramatically, degrading its military and governance capabilities in Gaza, freeing the hostages, preventing regional escalation, and searching for some kind of “least bad” post-major conflict management option.

This paper takes as a political and military “given” that Israel will continue to act forcefully to achieve these purposes—unless or until the costs of this course of action appear to exceed the benefits. While understandable, this primarily military approach might be characterized as a kind of “strategic myopia” in which Hamas has

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seized the strategic initiative and Israel is mainly reacting to it. Given the barbarity of October 7, it is easy to forget the meticulous planning by Hamas that went into its attack and easy to underestimate the group's longer-term strategy, which anticipates, and arguably welcomes, a brutal Israeli reaction.

One observer, in a fairly typical analysis, sees Hamas's strategy as rallying "a besieged population in Gaza around it in anger" . . . and helping to "collapse the Palestinian Authority government by ensuring Palestinians see it even more as a feckless adjunct to Israeli military authority." Meanwhile, "Arab states move strongly away from normalization, the Global South aligns strongly with the Palestinian cause, Europe recoils at the Israeli army's excesses, and an American debate erupts over Israel, destroying the bipartisan support Israel has enjoyed [there] since the early 1970s. Rumbblings of a regional war suit Hamas well, prompting global debates about the cost of an alliance with Israel . . . its goal is to estrange Israel from its international partners and turn it into the pariah that Hamas believes it to be."² Moreover, without an effective counter to Hamas's strategy, there could easily be outbreaks of conflict on multiple fronts (Gaza, Hezbollah, Houthi, as well as uprisings on the West Bank and in "mixed" Israeli cities).

These dire consequences are by no means inevitable as a result of Israel's primarily military strategy, but the odds of their happening are much higher than under the kind of "military plus political/diplomatic" strategy proposed in this paper.

Hamas would thus appear to have seized the strategic initiative with Israel's primary reaction being military action in Gaza. Without a more effective counter-strategy by Israel, its backers, and regional powers, Hamas's preferred scenario could continue to play out—especially if Israel has few post-Gaza plans for dealing with Palestinians beyond periodically suppressing violent actions while expanding settlements. With respect to some of the more extreme members of the current Israeli government, Ambassador Dennis Ross underscored the unreality of their implicit approach: "They are basically saying, 'We will control Palestinians forever, and they will simply accept it.'"³

2 Alterman, Jon B., "Israel Could Lose," Center for Strategic and International Studies (Washington, DC), November 7, 2023, accessed at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/israel-could-lose>

3 "Dennis Ross: On Gaza, 'Netanyahu's Far-right Ministers Aren't Living in Reality'," Haaretz Weekly, January 2, 2024, accessed at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/podcasts/2024-01-02/ty-paper-podcast/dennis-ross-on-gaza-netanyahus-far-right-ministers-arent-living-in-reality/0000018c-c6bc-ddba-abad-c6bd77b30000>

If that is the extent of Israel's post-war plans, the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank will feel increasingly hopeless, without the prospect of a "political horizon" for their national aspirations. And the stage for a resurgence of Hamas or its equivalent will be set. After all, beyond its military manifestation, Hamas represents an idea as well as a regional political force that will continue to attract adherents, especially if no credible political horizon exists for Palestinians. Barely two months into the war, polls indicate that the popularity of Hamas both on the West Bank and in Gaza has spiked.⁴ In particular, Hamas can readily recruit from the many Palestinians who will have lost relatives and friends from the current round of fighting as well as from others who feel embittered and hopeless. Increasingly serious eruptions of unrest and worse would seem inevitable, met by Israeli countermeasures. Yet as General David Petraeus wryly concluded, with respect to dealing with insurgents in Iraq, "We cannot kill our way out of this endeavor"—certainly not in the longer term.⁵

In short, for a secure Israel and an integrated region over time, the Palestinians cannot remain a "footnote." To regain the strategic initiative, Israeli warfighting should be part of a broader plan that addresses the Palestinian issue in a longer-term context—and promises collective benefits to Israel, the Palestinians, the region, and beyond. This approach should seek to split most Palestinians off from the militant path of Hamas by credibly offering a positive alternative. It should help Israel regain some of the moral high ground that it is rapidly losing as the Gaza war grinds on and civilian suffering and deaths mount. Israel's ultimate commitment to this approach is essential but unlikely at present given its political configuration. That is why the advocacy and participation of a larger group of interested countries on behalf of the AIPPI is integral both to gaining Israel's support and the initiative's successful implementation.

4 Agencies and TOI Staff, "Poll shows soaring Palestinian support for Hamas; 72% back October 7 atrocities", The Times of Israel, December 13, 2023, accessed at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/poll-shows-soaring-support-for-hamas-in-west-bank-as-90-say-abbas-should-resign/>

5 Petraeus, David H., "Multi-National Force-Iraq Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance," Military Review, September-October 2008, accessed at https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_2008CRII0831_art028.pdf



U.S. President Joe Biden meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to discuss the war between Israel and Hamas, in Tel Aviv, Israel, Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2023. At left, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. (Miriam Alster/Pool Photo via AP)

The Arab-Israeli-Palestinian Peace Initiative (“AIPPI”)

Such a longer-term vision and strategy might be called the **Arab-Israeli-Palestinian Peace Initiative (“AIPPI”)**, to be implemented on a phased basis. Before sketching its familiar elements—the easy part—note that the real contribution of this paper lies in analyzing the formidable barriers to the AIPPI and how they might be overcome. But for now, the elements of the AIPPI as a vision for the future:

- The military capabilities of Hamas in Gaza significantly eroded along with the various militant versions of the Muslim Brotherhood, jihadis, and radical Islamists coming under consistent and significant pressure from most regional Sunni governments.

- A strengthened, potentially reconstituted, and more credible Palestinian Authority (PA) contributing to the post-conflict governance of Gaza. Over time and as conditions permit, Gaza and the West Bank should unify under the PA, with elections to follow.
- A longer-term commitment by Israel, regional powers, the US, and others for two states or a confederal arrangement to be negotiated between Israelis and a united Palestinian entity with a restructured/ reformed security force that offers a credible path to self-determination while ensuring Israeli security.
- Normalized relations—political, commercial, and security—between Israel and the Sunni regional powers, in part to form a strengthened block to counter Iran and its proxies. Such normalization could well extend to other parts of the Muslim world.

The AIPPI is hardly an original concept; significant variations have been advanced by figures such as President Joe Biden, American Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, former Israeli, former Prime (and Defense) Minister Ehud Barak, and World Jewish Congress President Ronald Lauder.⁶ IF—and this is a big if—such a vision could be negotiated into existence, it would serve the core interests of most stakeholders except Hamas, its regional brethren including Iran, and some far-right elements of the Israeli government. The advantages would include a militarily weakened Hamas, the majority of Palestinians both in Gaza and the West Bank on a realistic path toward realizing their national aspirations, and a secure Israel integrated into the region, with mutual political, commercial, and security benefits. Moreover, the regional Sunni powers plus Israel would serve as a formidable block against Iran and proxies. In short, realization of the AIPPI would offer large joint gains relative to the fragmented, conflictual outcome sought by Hamas. (Aspirationally, as a longer-term goal, but not as part of the AIPPI, better relations should be pursued between the adversarial blocks now led by Iran and by Saudi Arabia.)

6 Biden, Joe, “Joe Biden: The U.S. won’t back down from the challenge of Putin and Hamas,” *The Washington Post*, November 18, 2023, accessed at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/18/joe-biden-gaza-hamas-putin/>; Magid, Jacob, “Blinken says ‘far too many Palestinians have been killed’ in Israel-Hamas war” *The Times of Israel*, November 11, 2023, accessed at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/blinking-says-far-too-many-palestinians-have-been-killed-in-israel-hamas-war/>; Cortelessa, Eric, “Former Israeli Prime Minister: Israel’s Endgame in Gaza Should be a Palestinian State,” *Time*, November 6, 2023, accessed at <https://time.com/6332127/israel-palestine-war-ehud-barak/>; Lauder, Ronald S., “Why Israel should promote peace in the midst of war,” *The Washington Post*, November 7, 2023, accessed at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/07/israel-peace-proposal-war-gaza/>

Potential Appeal of the AIPPI to Key Involved Parties

More specifically, here are some ways that the AIPPI would serve the interests of the relevant parties *if* the AIPPI could be made credible:

Why would US say yes to a version of the AIPPI?

- It aligns with long-term US national security and other interests in the Middle East that include Israel, the Palestinians, as well as regional powers.
- It mitigates virulent criticism for its seemingly unconditional support of “brutal” Israeli approach to Gaza.
- It positions Biden as regional statesman, offering a political “win” for an idea that strongly aligns with his administration’s proposal.

Why would Sunni regional powers say yes to a version of the AIPPI?

- At an elite and governmental level, many of these countries, with the exception of Qatar, are united by dislike of the militant elements of the Muslim Brotherhood and radical Islamists; increasing fears of regime instability if and as popular regional sympathy for Hamas and its ideological kin, already high since October 7, continues to grow.
- In accord with their advocacy for Palestinian rights, embracing, publicizing, and following through on the AIPPI would tangibly demonstrate—especially to their skeptical domestic populations—a genuinely meaningful commitment to the Palestinian cause.
- It would meet their interests in the security, technological, and commercial benefits of regional integration with Israel.
- It would help cement a stronger regional alliance to counter Iran and its proxies.



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken attends a meeting with Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani, during a day of meetings about the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, in Amman, Jordan, Saturday, Nov. 4, 2023. (Jonathan Ernst/Pool photo via AP)

Why would Palestinians say yes to a version of the AIPPI?

- The PA would welcome moves to strengthen its legitimacy and add credibility.
- The prospect of unifying the West Bank with Gaza would be powerfully appealing.
- The prospect of two states or a confederal outcome negotiated with Israel would fulfil a long-term vision for Palestinian national aspirations.

Why would Israel say yes to a version of the AIPPI?

- The current government, along with much of the Israeli electorate, absent the approach detailed below, would most certainly *not* now say yes.
- Nevertheless, a majority of the Israeli population deeply dislikes the current government. Sizeable fractions desire a two-state solution but only if Israeli security concerns were credibly assured.
- Enough Israelis might be induced to see three major potential advantages of a properly implemented AIPPI: 1) a longer-solution to the Palestinian issue with appropriate security safeguards, 2) stronger prospects of regional normalization, and 3) a stronger regional alliance against Iran and its proxies. These factors, elaborated below, might lead to a change in Israeli policy and/or in the government itself.

Daunting barriers to realization of the AIPPI

Of course, for such a wartime peace initiative to become a reality, it must overcome the major barriers to its realization, hinted at above, but deserving a fuller analysis. It is depressingly simple to enumerate the many such barriers that stand between the current situation and the promise of an AIPPI (see, e.g., Kurtzer and Miller⁷). Grouping these barriers into three inter-related categories, they include:

Barriers Directly Related to the Gaza War

- A militarily capable Hamas embedded in Gaza, currently holding substantial number of Israeli hostages.
- An extended Israeli campaign against Hamas with vastly increased civilian suffering and death that, despite Israeli efforts to avoid such casualties, profoundly alienating regional powers and other countries as well as imposing increasing diplomatic costs on Israel and its backers (especially the United States and some European states).
- Widespread public opinion in many regional Sunni Arab states that is incensed against Israel, given its massive military action in Gaza, and increasingly unwilling to support any further moves toward regional normalization with Israel.
- A potentially ungovernable, post-conflict Gaza.
- An almost singular focus among Israeli Jews on the military action in Gaza with a generalized suspicion of many if not most Palestinians as being aligned with or at least sympathetic to Hamas, underscored by the fact that President Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, has not unequivocally condemned Hamas's actions on October 7.

⁷ Kurtzer, Daniel, and Miller, Aaron David, "Biden Says the Israeli-Palestinian Status Quo Is Dead. Can He Build an Alternative?" Haaretz, December 27, 2023, accessed at <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2023-12-27/ty-paper-opinion/.premium/biden-says-the-israeli-palestinian-status-quo-is-dead-can-he-build-an-alternative/0000018c-ab19-d22d-a3dd-bf79e14d0000>

Barriers related to the feasibility and/or negotiation of a two-state or confederal solution

- Absence of credible Israeli and Palestinian leadership motivated and able to pursue a longer-term agreement between their peoples and in the region.
- A weak, unpopular, and illegitimate Palestinian Authority in the eyes of many inhabitants of the West Bank that is unable or unwilling to make the hard decisions necessary for a more permanent solution.
- An Israeli government led by a prime minister who appears guided by self-interest and is in thrall to an extreme right-wing coalition that appears fundamentally opposed to any AIPPI-like action.
- Widespread skepticism among Israeli Jews even to the concept of two states or a confederal solution (“no partner for peace” and fear of a militarized West Bank “taken over” or at least controlled by Hamas or its successor entities); outright opposition in right-wing quarters of the population to a move of this kind.
- Prior negotiations over “core issues” between Israelis and Palestinians—borders, settlements, security, refugees, Jerusalem—that have repeatedly failed in past attempts and have sometimes been followed by violence, breeding deep cynicism about peace processes.

Barriers related to potential actions of outside players

- US domestic skepticism/opposition (conservative Jews/AIPAC/Evangelicals); aside from more sober assessments of the challenges of two states, prominent evangelical pastor John Hagee even claims that an “Israeli-Palestinian peace deal will be the work of the anti-Christ.”⁸
- Spoiler efforts of Iran and its regional proxies; after all, many analysts suggest that a major factor in the timing of the Hamas attack was the heightened prospect of an Israeli-Saudi normalization.

⁸ Reider, Dimi, “The Two-State Solution Is Dead—and Liberal Zionists Can’t Save It,” *Foreign Policy*, December 31, 2021, accessed at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/31/israel-palestine-two-state-solution-liberal-zionism/>; Corn, David, “Pastor John Hagee Says an Israel-Palestinian Peace Deal Will Be the Work of the Anti-Christ,” *Mother Jones*, November 14, 2023, accessed at <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2023/11/pastor-john-hagee-says-an-israel-palestinian-peace-deal-will-be-the-work-of-the-anti-christ/>

IF—again, a big if—reasonable prospects for overcoming these barriers could be produced, the value of adopting the AIPPI as a wartime peace initiative could become compelling. If adopted, the nature of the war effort may well shift to support it as well as to militarily erode Hamas.

A five-part sketch of how key barriers to realizing the AIPPI might be surmounted

- 1. As a partial, interim substitute for the necessary but currently absent Israeli and Palestinian leadership, the US and key regional players—especially Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia—should quietly align on the concept of the AIPPI and begin to sell it through coordinated diplomatic initiatives in the region, to Israel, and to Palestinians.**

Under President Biden, the US has already urged adoption of key elements of the AIPPI. It should take the initial lead via coordinated diplomacy with regional states—especially Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—to persuade them to support the key elements of the AIPPI. Sophisticated sequential diplomacy will be required to forge such a *de facto* coalition since each of these Arab states has distinct interests, including its relationship with Israel and views toward Hamas.⁹ Individually and *collectively* these states should urge Israelis to commit to a more sustainable relationship with the Palestinians with the prospect of regional normalization—much dimmer than before the Gaza war—as a lure. And more privately, key members of this *de facto* coalition should quietly emphasize their willingness to consistently pressure militant elements of Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other jihadis. If and as Israel starts to make commitments in line with the AIPPI, the Saudis may be among the first states in the region willing to overtly resume normalization, provided that the US has taken the lead and offers

⁹ Khatib, Lina, “Why Arab States Must Lead on Gaza,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 4, 2023, accessed at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/why-arab-states-must-lead-gaza>

some of the security guarantees sought by the KSA. Others can be expected to follow depending on the pace and perceived sincerity of Israeli actions.

At present, however, with Israelis preoccupied with the fighting and emotions running high against “Palestinians” in general, outsiders including the US and regional players will need to take the initiative to quietly build support for the AIPPI concept in key quarters of Israel. Over time, if/as the current or next Israeli government begins to get behind it, Israel will and should be seen to be playing a pivotal role. As detailed below, work on strengthening and enhancing the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority is essential in order for it to play its essential role in the AIPPI process.

2. Induce explicit Israeli support for key features of the AIPPI.

Obviously, this will be a very tough nut to crack given how fresh the Gaza terror attacks are, the widespread Israeli determination to defeat Hamas militarily, the generalized suspicion of Palestinians (not only of Hamas), the failed history of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking attempts, and fear of control of the West Bank by Hamas or its successor entities. Persuading an Israeli public that a phased version of the AIPPI is both feasible and desirable will take great political skill if and when important Israeli players become convinced of its value—in part by the focused efforts of the US and regional players as described above.

- Key to overcoming this barrier will be focusing on more senior political figures, seen as likely to replace (or powerfully influence) the current government, who may realize the value of complementing the war effort with a peace initiative like the AIPPI. These politicians will have keen domestic insight into when and how best to publicly advocate for this concept and to build support for it, in part drawing the deep dissatisfaction with the current government’s policies.
- These factors could lead to new elections if enough members of Knesset defect, or as a result of a longshot possibility (a “constructive no-confidence vote”) in which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, after losing sufficient

support in the Knesset, turns the management of war to a new prime minister (e.g., Benny Gantz) without new elections.¹⁰

- What factors might be utilized by skilled politicians that could lead enough Israelis to accept key elements of the AIPPI? There are several overlapping possibilities:
 - The security, commercial, and political benefits of regional integration that could come about by an Israel that credibly commits to improving its relations with most Palestinians on a long-term basis.
 - The real promise of key Sunni governments cracking down on militant factions of Hamas, elements of the Muslim Brotherhood and radical Islamists in the region. (See #5 in this section for an elaboration of the feasibility of this taking place.)
 - Significant diplomatic pressure on Israel, especially from US—which has shown itself as a steadfast backer of Israel in the current crisis—to see a strategic “way out,” pointing to a better future than periodic wars and attacks like that of October 7.
 - The deep realization that Israel’s past strategy toward the Palestinians is in a shambles and that warfighting is not enough; a growing Israeli conviction that failure to meaningfully take Palestinians’ interests into account or to credibly provide them with real hope will lead to more of the same. The AIPPI, implemented in stages, represents a positive vision for the future that could provide this hope. It offers the prospect of a more stable and positive relationship with Palestinians rather than a continuation of the past decades of periodic eruptions and Israeli military action to repress them.
 - Increased public understanding that the argument that “there is no partner for peace” in significant part has resulted from past Israeli policy, spearheaded by Prime Minister Netanyahu, that was consciously designed to prevent two states by boosting Hamas

¹⁰ Green, David B., “Netanyahu Won’t Step Down. These Are the Other Ways to Oust Him,” Haaretz, December 3, 2023, accessed at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-03/ty-paper-magazine/.premium/netanyahu-wont-step-down-these-are-the-other-ways-to-oust-him/0000018c-2fe2-da74-afce-affb02c50000>

while delegitimizing and weakening the PA; see multiple sources for elaborations of this point.¹¹ Beyond routinely withholding tax revenues from the PA¹² and expanding settlements, manifestations of this policy go back to the manner in which captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was traded for 1027 Palestinian prisoners that gave Hamas full credit for this result, leaving the PA appearing ineffectual and unable to cause the release of any prisoners.¹³ This is not to exonerate the PA from its evident shortcomings (corruption, improper administration, etc.)¹⁴ but to underscore that the past “divide and conquer” strategy championed by Prime Minister Netanyahu offered Israelis a “peace” choice that represented no real choice to many Israelis: a deal with a militant Hamas (out of the question) or with an illegitimate and weak PA (pointless).

- Along with the “no partner for peace” argument is a widespread sentiment among Israelis, sometimes called “negotiation fatigue,” leads to the conviction that negotiations are pointless. In this view, relatively generous Palestinian statehood offers by Israeli Prime Ministers Ehud Barak in 2000 and Ehud Olmert in 2008 were not been taken up. Why bother to negotiate again, the argument goes, if the Palestinians have already rejected such offers? Independent of the competing arguments that swirl around the reasons for failure of past such negotiations,¹⁵ past refusals to accept an offer need not imply future refusals, especially under changed conditions. To

11 Raz, Adam, “A Brief History of the Netanyahu-Hamas Alliance,” Haaretz, October 20, 2023, accessed at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-20/ty-paper-opinion/.premium/a-brief-history-of-the-netanyahu-hamas-alliance/0000018b-47d9-d242-abef-57ff1be90000>; Schneider, Tal, “For years, Netanyahu propped up Hamas. Now it’s blown up in our faces,” The Times of Israel, October 8, 2023, accessed at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/for-years-netanyahu-propped-up-hamas-now-its-blown-up-in-our-faces/>; Shumsky, Dmitri, “Why Did Netanyahu Want to Strengthen Hamas?” October 11, 2023, accessed at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-11/ty-paper/.premium/netanyahu-needed-a-strong-hamas/0000018b-1e9f-d47b-a7fb-bfd8f30000>; “Buying Quiet’: Inside the Israeli Plan That Propped Up Hamas” The New York Times, December 2023, accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/10/world/middleeast/israel-qatar-money-prop-up-hamas.html#:~:text=Suitcases%20Full%20of%20Cash,cease-fire%20agreement%20with%20Hamas>.

12 “The withholding of Palestinian tax revenues by Israel,” European Parliament, Parliamentary question - E-006864/2020, December 15, 2020, accessed at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2020-006864_EN.html

13 Sherwood, Harriet, “Gilad Shalit’s release has given Hamas a boost, says Tzipi Livni,” The Guardian, October 23, 2011, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/23/gilad-shalit-release-hamas-boost>

14 al-Omari, Ghaith, “To Prevent the PA from Unraveling, Address Internal Reform,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 28, 2023, accessed at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/prevent-pa-unraveling-address-internal-reform>

15 For a recent panel discussion of such arguments, see “Was Peace Ever Possible? A discussion moderated by Emily Bazelon,” New York Times Magazine (online), November 20, 2023, accessed on January 21, 2024 at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/11/20/magazine/israel-gaza-oslo-accords.html>.

illustrate this point in another context, consider one party's offer to buy the business started by an entrepreneur. The purchase offer may be indignantly refused even if made a few years later: "my business is still not for sale!" Yet if the entrepreneur is nearing retirement or another intriguing business opportunity has presented itself, that identical offer to buy, if made a third time, may be accepted, even without improved terms (though better terms may make the proposal even more attractive). In short, when circumstances change, new incarnations of formerly "unacceptable" proposals may become far more appealing. And whether it is the Abraham Accords, October 7, new leadership, or many other recent changes in the region, reasoning from the past that negotiations would be pointless is mistaken as a practical matter and can lead to a self-fulfilling failure not to make the attempt.

- In stages, over time, the AIPPI gives hope for a credible partner in a strengthened PA minus Hamas; see below for more specifics. Israeli public opinion often forgets that, in stark contrast with Hamas, the PA has recognized Israel, has often renounced violence, and has continued (highly unpopular) security cooperation with the IDF in the West Bank—and that would be far more popular if it was credibly in service of advancing a genuine "political horizon." Remarkably, in December 2023, senior Hamas official Mousa Abu Marzouk suggested that Hamas might recognize Israel as a step toward ending the long-running divisions between the Palestinian factions.¹⁶ By shifting policy toward supporting and strengthening Palestinian moderates, the odds over time of a mutually successful negotiation with Israel increase substantially.
- Many Israelis see Hezbollah as the result of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon and Hamas as the result of its withdrawal from Gaza. Hence the idea of a Palestinian state—potentially taken over by Hamas or its militant equivalent—appears to many Israelis to be a frightening continuation of that "trend" writ large, extending throughout the West Bank. Such fears are understandable, but there are at least four mitigating factors. First, much current

¹⁶ Elizabeth Hagedorn, "In shift, a top Hamas official floats Israel recognition," *Al-Monitor*, December 13, 2023, accessed at <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/12/shift-top-hamas-official-floats-israel-recognition>



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, left, meets with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Saturday Oct. 14, 2023. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin, Pool)



anti-Israeli sentiment among Palestinians derives from over half a century of military occupation, sharply restricted rights, increased settlement expansion, and the absence of any meaningful “political horizon,” or prospects for their own state and self-governance. Second, even with such discouraging political prospects, the pre-October 7 support for Hamas among both West Bank and Gaza was less than one in five people according to The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR). As noted above, while support for Hamas shot up during the war, this is likely to be temporary since, “as shown in all previous PSR polls, Hamas’ increased popularity during wars begins to erode soon after the wars end, eventually returning to where it was before the war.”¹⁷ Third, if and when a credible nonviolent pathway toward a negotiated two-state solution or confederation opens up and genuine progress is being made, the lure of Hamas should decline. Finally, as the next section details, any acceptable negotiated agreement to Israelis will offer substantial security measures.

- A reminder that any feasible two-state outcome (or options such as a confederal approach; see, e.g., here or here¹⁸) could potentially include a number of important elements ensuring Israeli security that have apparently proved negotiable in the past (e.g., a long-horizon withdrawal of Israeli troops as conditions permitted; a nonmilitarized Palestine without heavy weapons or an air force; a long-term cooperative security program among the Shin Bet, the Mossad, the IDF and the Palestinian security services; massively enhanced Jordan Valley border

17 The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research and Arab Barometer, “Report I: Domestic Balance of Power and Palestinian-Israeli Relations before and after October the 7th” January 15, 2024, pp.1-2. Accessed January 20, 2024 at <https://pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/AB8%20Palestine%20Report%201%20English%20w%20table%20of%20findings.pdf>.

18 Scheindlin, Dahlia, “Not Two States, Not One State: A New Way Out of Disaster for Israelis and Palestinians,” Haaretz, November 30, 2023, accessed at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-30/ty-paper/premium/not-two-states-not-one-state-a-new-way-out-of-disaster-for-israelis-and-palestinians/0000018c-1fc0-d21c-abae-7ffc7f960000>; A Land for All: Two States One Homeland, <https://www.alandforall.org/english/?d=ltr>

protection with rapid deployment options and potentially even the staging of some US troops, etc.; for more details of various options from prior negotiations, see pp. 462-466 here¹⁹). For a security-based, staged approach toward a two-state outcome carefully formulated by a large group of former Israeli generals and their equivalents in Israel's security services (the IDF, Shin Bet, Mossad and Israel Police), see "Initiative 2025."²⁰

- The current Israeli government is deeply unpopular; public pressure to change its approach could be productively directed toward an AIPPI in parallel with the Gaza war effort.

3. Strengthen the Palestinian Authority.

While unlikely under the current Israeli government, a combination of the Arab League, the EU, the US, and Israel should rapidly begin to work with Palestinians toward strengthening and potentially restructuring the PA for greater legitimacy, transparency, and effectiveness. If/as the current Israeli government changes policy, it could greatly enhance such efforts (as detailed below). This would enable the PA, over time, to play important roles in the eventual integration of Gaza and the West Bank, in major developmental investment in the West Bank and Gaza, in the acceleration of the US efforts to develop PA security forces, and effectively engaging with Israelis and regional parties in negotiating longer term arrangements that are at the heart of the AIPPI.

These roles would require enhanced PA legitimacy and capabilities, in part via new elections when appropriate. Such a "new PA" need not require a wholesale dismantling of the current PA; older figures such as President Abbas could be "elevated" to more symbolic, honorific roles. Issues such as corruption, poor administration, and authoritarian tendencies will require Palestinian actions, firmly

¹⁹ Kerry, John, *Every Day Is Extra*, Simon & Schuster, 2018.

²⁰Commanders for Israel's Security, "Initiative 2025: Immediate Term Actions to Promote Israel's Security," November 2021, accessible at en.cis.org.il.

urged by supportive regional powers. A thoughtful Palestinian perspective on the requirements for a strengthened and revitalized PA can be found here.²¹

Yet Israel has a crucial role in this task, especially given its history of implicitly boosting Hamas while undermining the PA— as sketched in point #2 above—via withholding tax revenues, imposing onerous administrative burdens and lengthy delays for simple actions such as granting building permits, installing solar panels, and so on. In tandem with Palestinian actions, reversing these tacit and explicit Israeli policies would considerably enhance the PA.

Of course, this latter set of steps implies at least some level of collective acceptance of the AIPPI's commitment to revive multilateral and bilateral diplomatic efforts toward resolving core Israeli-Palestinian issues with a “political horizon.” This would be a tough sell in Israel after October 7, and one that may require new elections in Israel or at least a major shift in policy—as noted above.

If/as Israel were persuaded that this path were desirable, likely requiring a change of government, the PA could be strengthened and given added legitimacy by Israel explicitly accepting the goal of two states or a confederal approach in a manner that incorporates AIPPI elements. Other more tangible and nearer-term actions to boost the PA could include expanding its powers in Area B and approving Palestinian strategic projects in Area C, imposing restraints on settlement and outpost expansion, cracking down on settler violence, and so on. Numerous Palestinians have attested to the immediate boost in the PA's status that would result from its ability to secure “visible results on the ground”—in contrast to widespread views that it has been worse than ineffective. Over time, a rehabilitated PA could become the basis for building the institutions of interim governance and ultimate statehood for Palestinians.

21 Shikaki, Khalil, “Palestinian Future after the Israeli Reoccupation of the Gaza Strip,” Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Critical Policy Brief, Number 6/2023, November 2023, accessed at <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/959>; Dr. Salam Fayyad, “A Plan for Peace in Gaza,” Foreign Affairs, October 27, 2023, accessed at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/plan-for-peace-gaza-fayyad> and “The Palestinian cause has been damaged by factionalism, argues a former prime minister” The Economist, Oct 11th 2023, accessed at <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2023/10/11/the-palestinian-cause-has-been-damaged-by-factionalism-argues-a-former-prime-minister>.

4. Israel, prompted by its own concerns as well as those of the United States and other nations, should demonstrate a deeper commitment to avoiding civilian suffering and death in Gaza to the maximum extent possible—and, when politically feasible, articulate a clear commitment to the endgame proposed in the AIPPI.

This approach should permit sharply delimited humanitarian pauses (as have been announced and contemplated), cease-fires for hostage release or other purposes, the establishment of aid corridors, the provision of massive amounts of necessary aid, restoring vital civilian services, and other actions to make it clearer to Gazans as well as to broader regional and global audiences that Israel's battle is with the militant wing of Hamas, not the civilians of Gaza or Palestinians in general. The prosecution of the war must seek as much as possible to comply with international law and respect human rights. It should become more specifically targeted toward Hamas and far less "heavy" in its actions.

Its actions should in part be designed to help show Gazans that life will be better post-Hamas—a very difficult but important goal. As but one example, when Israeli troops "cleared" Hamas fighters from the Al Shifa hospital, they should have very visibly followed that action by opening up a safe corridor to the hospital for the wounded and sick to use, repaired the key parts of the facility to make it operational, and immediately ensured that it had adequate medicines and health professionals available to resume their urgent work. If combined with a credible Israeli commitment to rebuilding Gaza (with major international help), its eventual unification with the West Bank, and Palestinian statehood as the desired endgame, Israel's military actions could be rendered far more palatable than absent such a longer-term vision.

This is a delicate balancing act: from an Israeli perspective, its actions in Gaza must be militarily strong enough to make a real military difference vis-à-vis Hamas and to enhance deterrence, especially of Hezbollah. It must be significant and visible enough to respond to the absolute Israeli domestic imperative of powerful retaliation in the face of the horror of October 7. Yet it cannot be so apparently ruthless and seemingly unmindful of civilian suffering and casualties as to completely alienate global players and, in particular, regional parties that could

play key roles in eroding the power of Hamas (see #5 below) and fostering regional integration. And it cannot ignore the hostages. In the West Bank, this effort should actively oppose and stop settler violence.

5. Undertake three-pronged regional diplomatic efforts to oppose Hamas, revive normalization efforts, and formulate post-conflict Gaza initiatives.

The next essential element to support the AIPPI, which should take place in parallel with the actions listed above, consists of skillful regional diplomacy on three broadly parallel tracks that, at first, may seem implausible and even counterintuitive. First, this diplomatic effort should quietly enlist the help of key regional parties to weaken militant factions of Hamas and like-minded groups by striving to cut off resources, delegitimize them and pressure their supporters. Second, as soon as politically feasible, this diplomatic initiative should seek to accelerate the earlier normalization process that Hamas evidently sought to spoil via its brutal actions and the massive Israeli reaction. Third, a necessary condition for the first two actions and its essential political “price” is the vigorous Sunni Arab advocacy of a longer-term and sustainable solution that meets Palestinian national aspirations—along with Israeli and American openness to and ultimate embrace of such a solution, whether two states or a confederal system. Initially, with US partnership, the KSA should take the lead in advancing the normalization process contingent on Israeli acceptance of key elements of the AIPPI. The earlier the announcement and the greater the support of the longer-term positive vision represented by the AIPPI, the more likely these diplomatic initiatives will succeed. In tandem with this diplomacy, an effort by key parties—the Arab League, the EU, the UNSC permanent representatives (to the extent feasible), and others—should be galvanized for playing constructive roles, direct or indirect, toward governance and reconstruction in a post-conflict Gaza and toward an acceptance of an active and credible peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. (Pulling off this triple-trick will call for the diplomatic craft of a Secretaries Henry Kissinger or Jim Baker—but have faith . . .)

To understand how this three-pronged diplomacy might advance in practice, it is crucial to focus on an important divide between the relevant Sunni

governments—especially, Egypt, Jordan, KSA, some Gulf states, and others—and the views of much of the population in these countries. The stunning “success” of Hamas has re-energized much of the Arab world, the famous “street” with its corresponding social media feeds, by striking a heavy blow to Israel that is seen to be on behalf of the Palestinians writ large. In this emotionally potent view, Hamas is a legitimate political actor and Israeli actions—whether vis-à-vis settlers in the West Bank or how it has prosecuted the war—are comparable to Hamas’ actions on October 7. The resurgent popularity of Hamas triumph has terrified regional (Sunni) governments—and not only the Saudis, Egyptians, and Jordanians—about the implications of revived militant elements of the Muslim Brotherhood, jihadists, and radical Islamists, of which the militant wing of Hamas is an exemplar. Such a revival could very well threaten their stability. Saudi, Israeli and American diplomacy should build on and harness this deep and justified concern.

So how to thread a diplomatic path through these seeming contradictions between reawakened strong Arab public support of the Palestinian cause and strong opposition by Sunni governments to a revival of Hamas and its like-minded allies?

First, rather than immediately press for a renewed normalization process, frame part of this regional diplomatic effort, likely minus Qatar, as a relatively quiet but serious collective push to weaken the military wing of Hamas and like-minded entities, thereby to frustrate Iran. This means efforts to cut off funding, delegitimize, and apply pressure to such militant entities. This means efforts to cut off funding to the militant wing of Hamas and its allies, delegitimize it, and apply pressure to its supporters. This initiative should focus on the regional governments’ interests to weaken the Muslim Brotherhood (i.e., Hamas and its allies), “not give Iran a win” and, more broadly, to strengthen the anti-Iran coalition.

Second, as the joint effort to weaken Hamas gathers steam (and in tandem with the third point below), accelerate the Saudi-led process of Arab normalization with Israel as a direct rebuke to the efforts of Hamas to spoil this dynamic. The Saudis are key to this approach and the United States should consider being more forthcoming with carefully structured security and nuclear concessions to the Saudis in the normalization process.

Third, the absolutely necessary condition and realistic “price” of such anti-Hamas actions and resumption of normalization by various Sunni governments must be credible and serious Israeli (and American) consideration/acceptance of a very public set of demands by these Sunni governments for strengthened commitments to real progress on longer-term Palestinian issues. This is where the AIPPI comes in. Such credible commitments are essential for these Sunni governments to sustain domestic political support—and align with their genuine and politically popular values that deeply resonate with Palestinian national aspirations. In fact, the sharply renewed Arab public focus on the Palestinian issue makes it politically imperative that Sunni governments even more strongly advocate for a longer-term Palestinian solution. This can only happen to the extent that Israel credibly comes to support the AIPPI; otherwise, any supposed commitment to Palestinian interests will be seen as superficial at best.

Even as the conflict rages, a range of parties—including Israelis, Palestinians, the Arab League, the EU, and the US—should commit to developing a detailed administrative structure to govern Gaza to which Israel can safely hand control if/ as it is successful in removing Hamas from operational control in that territory. While there is no politically or pragmatically realistic alternative to Israeli provision of security for a period of time after the hot conflict subsides, a number of other options should be considered and developed that could involve a range of local, regional, and/or global players.²² In almost any case, a strengthened PA should play an increasing role in this task over time. Yet without Israeli acceptance of a longer-term, positive vision, most other candidate entities for a post-conflict Gaza role have stressed their extreme reluctance to meaningfully participate.

Along with developing such an administrative structure to supplant Israeli control, the parties should also envision a kind of Marshall Plan for Gaza, heavily supported by regional powers. As with options to provide post-conflict security and Gazan governance, Israeli acceptance of a longer-term, positive vision such as the AIPPI will greatly enhance the chances that massive reconstruction aid will be forthcoming.

²² Solomon, Solon, “Gaza After Hamas: A Proposal for a Palestinian Future,” fathom, November 2023, accessed at <https://fathomjournal.org/gaza-after-hamas-a-proposal-for-a-palestinian-future/>

The Promise and Peril of a Phased Approach to the AIPPI

While this paper has offered the AIPPI as a longer-term strategy and vision—without detailed consideration of ongoing fighting and the civilian catastrophe in Gaza, the hostages, a cease-fire, a “day after” blueprint and so on—many steps should be taken now to enhance the odds of the AIPPI becoming a reality; a number of analysts (e.g., Kurtzer²³) have spelled out potential phases in an effort like this.

In any positive vision for the regional future such as the AIPPI, timing is essential. Quietly but urgently, AIPPI advocates must intensify the necessary diplomatic groundwork among the United States, regional parties, the EU, sympathetic Israelis, and others. They need to develop support for this concept in the region, in part by beginning to work discretely with key Israeli parties to persuade them of its value and necessity. If the Quartet (US, EU, Russia, and the UN), or a new version minus Russia but including the Arab League, can be productively revived on behalf of this initiative, involve it. Other activities from humanitarian aid, a “lighter” Israeli military approach, plans for post-conflict governance in Gaza, strengthening the PA, and the like, should be undertaken as soon as practicable.

As observed at the outset of this paper, the AIPPI can only work if it is implemented in phases, or in stages, over time: as Israelis, working with the United States and the Palestinians, become more confident that their security concerns on the West Bank can be met and that regional normalization is the credible “reward” for embrace of the AIPPI, as the Palestinians come to believe in a genuine Israeli acceptance of a political horizon for their aspirations and progress toward realizing them, and as regional powers see these Israeli and Palestinian convictions as real.

Yet, as necessary and valuable is this kind of phased approach, it also opens the door to would-be spoilers of all kinds who view the AIPPI as inimical to their interests: Israeli far right-wingers, Palestinian rejectionists, and Iranian-influenced parties in the region who fear regional integration of Israel with Sunni states, and repudiate the very existence of the state of Israel. The years before the promise of a vision like the AIPPI can be realized gives plenty of time for internal and external opponents

²³ Kurtzer, Daniel, “What Needs to Happen When the Fighting Stops in Gaza,” *The Atlantic*, December 14, 2023, accessed at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/12/plan-day-after-gaza-israel-palestinian-peace/676326/>

to coalesce, recruit other skeptics and naysayers, and undermine the process before it has sufficiently advanced. AIPPI supporters must, at a minimum, anticipate such actions by spoilers, call them out, and be prepared to take countermeasures from making good arguments, to persuading those opponents open to reason, to dividing and conquering, and so on. Most importantly, overcoming these potential spoilers requires the broadest and deepest possible acceptance of the end-state vision of the AIPPI and ongoing efforts to build and buttress a winning coalition to support it.

If the many difficult blanks in this rough outline of the AIPPI can be credibly filled in, the outcome of this tragic drama will be significant improvements for all regional parties, including Israel and the Palestinians. The main “losers” would be the militant wing of Hamas, its ideological cousins and other Iranian proxies, as well as the extreme right in Israel. This would mean the opposite of the enfeebled Israel envisioned by Iran and Hamas in a conflict-torn region with the Palestinians even further from realizing their national aspirations. Relative to a primarily military approach by Israel without a forward-looking political vision, embrace of the AIPPI will result over time in a stronger, more regionally integrated Israel via a normalization process, collective economic and military benefits, a defanged Hamas and its allies, and a much more sustainable relationship between Israel and its Palestinian neighbors who will enjoy far more positive prospects.



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