



URGENT: An Israeli Strategy for a Post-Hamas Gaza

by Prof. Jonathan Rynhold and Dr. Toby Greene

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,225, October 25, 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israelis have united around the goal of toppling the Hamas regime, but little has been said about what would come after. This issue is critical to Israel's security and must be addressed. Israeli interests are best served by establishing in Gaza a PA-linked administration alongside a massive reconstruction program backed by the US and other international and regional actors. Israel's declaration of support for establishing such a regime in Gaza as soon as possible would provide a political direction to the military operation and enhance its international legitimacy. Defeating Hamas must ultimately mean not only its military destruction but the empowerment of a moderate Palestinian alternative.

Introduction

In response to the brutal slaughter of 1,300 Israelis and others and the cruel abduction of more than 200 more, Israelis have united around the goal of not only destroying Hamas's military capabilities but toppling the Hamas regime as well. Very little has been said about what would come after this. However, Israel cannot afford to avoid this issue. If Israel is to attain its underlying security objectives, there must be a sustainable political order to replace Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

What comes next in Gaza matters hugely for both Israel and its allies in the Middle East and across the world. If Israel does not take the initiative in formulating a plan for the future of Gaza, others will.

If Israel can articulate a vision for a post-Hamas Gaza that has international buy-in, it will also extend the legitimacy of Israel's military operation. To maximize its interests, therefore, Israel needs to begin setting out its vision now, and working with willing partners on a plan for Gaza.

Having invested heavily in supporting Israel at this stage, the Biden administration and others will expect Israel to pay heed to US interests later. Those include generating a sustainable post-war reality that not only ensures Israel's security but also dramatically improves the wellbeing of the Palestinian public, while denying Iran and its allies any gains.

Aside from the moral and humanitarian dimension, the reconstruction of Gaza can serve an Israeli strategic interest by contributing to the normalization of Israel's relations in the region, notably with Saudi Arabia. This, in turn, will serve to weaken Iran and its allies who pose the main threat to Israel's security.

There is no ideal or risk-free option for a post-Hamas Gaza, but Israel must determine which of the limited available options best serve its interests. Below we assess various possible political outcomes of the conflict. We then argue that Israeli interests are best served by establishing in Gaza a PA-linked administration alongside a massive reconstruction program backed by the US and other international and regional actors that share Israel's basic interests there.¹

1. The Status Quo Ante

Israel could comprehensively degrade Hamas's military capabilities but withdraw without toppling the regime. Israel would then contain the inherent security threats through blockade and periodic limited warfare. This would be a continuation of the policy that prevailed throughout Netanyahu's almost 15-year tenure as prime minister. It has the advantage of being familiar and may cost fewer lives in the short run than overthrowing the Hamas regime's rule over Gaza.

Yet it is highly problematic. It would contradict Israel's stated war aim and thus further damage its deterrence posture towards Hezbollah and other enemies. Nor would this outcome suffice to make Israelis feel secure enough to return home to the Gaza envelope.

The more fundamental problem is that this option risks recreating the same strategic failure that made October 7 possible. The containment option has completely and utterly failed. More Israelis died in Hamas's attack than in the entire Second Intifada. But this was not only a tactical failure, related to intelligence and defensive deployments. It was the outcome of a strategic error.

For nearly 20 years, Israel largely ignored the conditions in Gaza that allowed Hamas to acquire advanced arms – despite the blockade – and free rein within the territory to recruit a suicide terror army from an almost limitless pool of radicalized, unemployed and prospectless young men. These conditions included the systematic undermining (at least since 2015) of any prospect of an alternative to Hamas that would give Palestinians hope for a better future, one tied to peaceful coexistence with the Jewish state.

The ability to largely ignore the overarching political problem posed by the Gaza Strip was fed by an adoration of hi-tech tactical defensive solutions and an “outside-in” diplomatic strategy that assumed Israel could normalize relations with Arab states while leaving the Palestinian question marginalized and contained. Simply dealing Hamas another great blow and then going back to doing the same things all over again is strategically myopic and domestically unacceptable.

2. Israeli Occupation

The next alternative is for Israel to systematically dismantle Hamas through military means and reoccupy the Gaza Strip on a long-term basis. Military occupation would maximize Israel’s security control - but it would also maximize the political and diplomatic costs as well as the economic burden. Israel would bear full responsibility for the Gazan population including reconstruction. The presence of its forces in Palestinian urban areas would leave them constantly exposed and a constant source of friction – part of the reason Israel left the Gaza Strip in the first place.

Putting more than two million Palestinians (plus tens of thousands more each year through demographic growth) under long-term Israeli occupation would also place unbearable strain on Israel’s claim to be a Jewish and democratic state – the consensual foundation of the state’s domestic legitimacy. And as recent events indicate, the absence of such an underlying consensus serves to greatly embolden Israel’s enemies, who believe undermining social solidarity in Israel is key to undermining its resilience. Aside from this, indefinite occupation would take any expansion of the Abraham Accords off the table and might even lead to the reversal of progress made in recent years.

3. An International Protectorate

International involvement is vital to fund, guide and implement reconstruction and a new political order in the Gaza Strip. But after costly and failed experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, neither Western nor Arab states will have much

enthusiasm to accept full responsibility for the governance of Gaza. International forces are only successful in peacekeeping missions where the basic will to maintain the peace is already present, as in Sinai. Where that will is absent, international forces are either driven out or become irrelevant due to an unwillingness to sustain losses to impose the standard of law and order required to facilitate reconstruction.

4. The Palestinian Authority

In the long run, only a Palestinian administration can acquire the local and international legitimacy necessary for sustainable political order. The most immediate available option is the Palestinian Authority (PA). Israel handed Gaza over to the PA when it withdrew in 2005. Even following Hamas's overthrow of the PA in 2007, the PA has remained involved in the governance of the territory, paying for some salaries and services, and coordinating with Israel on aspects of entry and exit. During the same period, the PA has, with reasonable consistency, maintained security cooperation with Israel to suppress Hamas in the West Bank.

The primary problem with the PA as an alternative to Hamas is its weakness. It is overwhelmingly viewed, not least among Palestinians, as corrupt², increasingly authoritarian, and facing a looming leadership crisis. Yet it was not always this bad. When Salam Fayyad was prime minister more than a decade ago, corruption was reduced, governance improved, and the rule of law strengthened, and the economy grew. He was undermined because he threatened vested interests of established Palestinian political groups and because the international community focused its efforts more on drawn-out and fruitless final status negotiations than on building on Fayyad's successes on the ground.

5. The Preferred Option: PA+, a Combined Approach

While the PA is too weak to manage alone, it could be bolstered by international involvement in the reconstruction effort on the ground, coordinated by the US and made up primarily of Western and moderate Arab partners. Other observers have pointed to Kosovo as a model for a local administration supported by a UN-endorsed NATO force.³

The PA and other Arab actors will want to avoid any impression that they are coordinating with Israel during its military mission. Nonetheless, Israel should make clear even now its ultimate intentions: to withdraw from the Gaza Strip as soon as possible and to work with the PA and international partners to establish a Palestinian administration capable of rehabilitating the Strip, and ensuring Hamas and other jihadist groups can never return.

The US and its allies will be wary of direct involvement in state-building after the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. But Gaza is more manageable: a small territory with two neighbors, Israel and Egypt, sharing the capability and interest to uphold the new order, and with the basis of an alternative administration already available in the shape of the PA.

There are also valuable lessons to be learned from the Iraq debacle, notably from the failed de-Ba'athification policy. The wholesale firing of all officials associated with Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party destroyed the prospects for effective administration while serving as a recruiting tool for the jihadists. To avoid creating a comparable vacuum in Gaza, Israel must plan now how it can incorporate elements of the existing bureaucracy into a stable post-Hamas political order.

At the same time, rather than simply handing governance directly to the West Bank PA, Israel should explore with the US options for cultivating a technocratic Palestinian leadership in Gaza that can reestablish the bottom-up, institution-building model associated with Salam Fayyad. This would be under the umbrella of the PA, but the funds would flow directly to the new Palestinian administration in Gaza.⁴

What happens in Gaza is of huge importance to major regional and international actors. This provides an opportunity to bring friendly states into the process of reconstruction, which will enhance the prospects for success. The states of the Negev Forum (Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States) established in the wake of the Abraham Accords, plus Jordan, Saudi Arabia and perhaps the EU, can provide the political framework and economic heft to set Gaza on a new footing. The US will have to take a leading role to rally its allies and raise reconstruction funds from oil-rich Gulf States. The Saudis have an interest in providing finance and legitimacy. They are willing to invest capital in improving their image and prestige in the West and seek to rebuild the context for normalizing relations with Israel.

With Hamas out of the way, many development opportunities that have been hampered by their rule may be freed up. These include "Gas for Gaza" (i.e., providing gas from Israel's grid); developing Gaza's own offshore gas fields; expanding water desalination facilities; upgrading energy, water and communications infrastructure; transforming the movement and access regime; and creating new employment and industry opportunities.

Palestinian, regional and international support for this process will be enhanced if Israel commits to supporting the PA not only in Gaza but in the West Bank. This

includes through a reaffirmation of the two-state solution and practical steps to reinvigorate bottom-up state-building, possibly linked to normalization with Saudi Arabia.

If all these players can pull together, political credit for rebuilding Gaza and improving the prospects for Palestinian statehood would go to moderate Arab and Palestinian forces, providing a compelling alternative to the death, destruction and defeat offered by Hamas and Iran.

Conclusion

There are many risks, obstacles and spoilers that can disrupt this approach. Military decisions will be shaped by the developments and costs on the ground. But with the shattering of the 17-year status quo, it is time to clarify the choices that have been obscured under Netanyahu's tenure: either an incremental process to build an internationally backed Palestinian state that will be committed to peaceful relations with Israel; occupation forever; or an unceasing conflict with an Iranian-backed Hamastan.

Too often Israel is dragged towards diplomatic options rather than taking the initiative. But Israel's interests are served by taking the lead, in this case by declaring its support for the establishment of a PA and internationally backed Palestinian administration to replace Hamas in Gaza as soon as possible. This will not only provide a political direction to the military operation but enhance international legitimacy.

In the broader perspective, defeating Hamas must mean more than crushing its forces or even toppling its regime. Israel must play its part in draining Hamas's appeal for the long term by strengthening the credibility of a moderate Palestinian alternative. For far too long, Israel has failed to articulate a diplomatic horizon that could empower Palestinian moderates in opposition to Hamas and other extremists, believing the latter could be contained. Now it is clear that not only does Israel's legitimacy as a Jewish and democratic state depend ultimately on a two-state arrangement, but its security depends on empowering non-jihadist Palestinian politics.

Prof Jonathan Rynhold is head of the Political Studies Department at Bar-Ilan University and a senior researcher at the BESA Center. Dr. Toby Greene is a senior lecturer in the Department of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University and a researcher at the BESA Center.

¹ While some might suggest Egyptian control over the Gaza Strip, we do not consider this an option as Egypt would never accept such a role.

² Public Opinion Poll No (87), *Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research*, 23 March 2023, <https://pcpsr.org/en/node/938>.

³ Steven Simon, 'What Comes After Hamas? A Plan to Return the Gaza Strip to Palestinians and Keep Israel Safe', *Foreign Affairs*, 18 October 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/what-comes-after-hamas>

⁴ For a proposal along these lines see: Robert Satloff, Dennis Ross, David Makovsky, 'Israel's War Aims and the Principles of a Post-Hamas Administration in Gaza', Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 17 October 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-war-aims-and-principles-post-hamas-administration-gaza>