



# Beyond Humanitarian Aid: A Plan for Gazan Civilians Is a Strategic Necessity for Israel

by Toby Greene and Jonathan Rynhold

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** To continue its mission to defeat Hamas, Israel must take the initiative to replenish the stores of international legitimacy lost due to the acute humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. While the primary blame for the crisis lies with Hamas, which cares nothing for Gazan civilians, Israel is being held responsible even by the US for not doing enough to get aid in. In the short term, the crisis has exhausted the legitimacy needed to continue the military operation, including in Rafah. In the longer term, the consequences of the destruction and humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip – which must now be understood as an event of lasting global and political significance – threaten to burden Israel with severe and long-term reputational damage. To restore at least some measure of legitimacy for the war, Israel must move proactively with respect to the plight of civilians. It must not only adopt a coherent and consistent approach to Gaza’s humanitarian situation, but also tie its war aims to a broadly acceptable political vision for Gaza and the wider Palestinian arena. This means aligning with US-led proposals for regional peace, including a credible path to an eventual two-state solution. By moving proactively in this direction, Israel can better shape the process and garner much-needed international credit. These proposals in any case present Israel with the chance to leverage the catastrophe of October 7 into a game-changing opportunity to achieve the normalization with Saudi Arabia that Hamas and its Iran-led allies sought to prevent.

**Introduction:** What you see from here, you don’t see from there – and vice versa

In the weeks after October 7, it was not only President Biden who came to show solidarity but leaders of other Western powers, including Britain, France and Germany, all of whom gave unwavering support to Israel and its right to defend itself. These leaders were aligned with their publics, with [polling](#) showing a broad swell of international sympathy.

Yet by December, the same polls showed that support was dropping sharply and domestic pressure was increasing on Western leaders to rein Israel in. As the human suffering in the Gaza Strip has grown – particularly the concentration of the population in Rafah and the acute food shortage in the north – so too has international pressure. Israel now faces a wall of opposition to its plans to attack Rafah, which in turn reduces its leverage in hostage talks.

While many Israelis find criticism difficult to understand following October 7, it is important to grasp how the war is seen from outside. By January, some 60% of Gaza's [housing units](#) had been destroyed or damaged. An estimated 1.7 million of Gaza's 2.3 million people are internally displaced. In addition, there are no electricity mains, no functioning schools, and scarce access to healthcare. Many medical facilities, of course, have been abused by Hamas for military purposes; and there is certainly good reason to be skeptical of the claims of some UN agencies, including UNRWA, and sections of the international press. Yet the destruction and resulting deprivation in the Gaza Strip are extensively documented, and there is a consensus about the scale and urgency of these issues among Israel's strongest supporters, including the US and UK (who are themselves directly fighting the Houthis).

Significant destruction of civilian infrastructure was inevitable due to Hamas's embedding itself and Israeli hostages within and beneath the civilian population. Israel has made significant efforts to move civilians away from the most intense areas of operation. The primary responsibility therefore lies with Hamas, which cares nothing whatever for Gazan civilians. There are also justified [doubts](#) around fatalities reported by Hamas-run authorities, and IDF claims for combatants killed suggest that the percentage of non-combatant fatalities may be no worse or even better than in urban warfare conducted by Western forces.

Nonetheless, the total count of more than 30,000 fatalities, widely cited internationally and not refuted by the IDF, has a significant impact on international opinion. Israel has not managed to avoid criticism, even from President Biden, that it is not being careful enough to minimize civilian deaths.

When it comes to humanitarian aid, the Israeli government says it does not restrict the quantities entering the Gaza Strip and blames UN agencies for lacking the capacity to deliver. No doubt there is justification for this claim. Nonetheless, State Department spokesmen have listed for [journalists](#) a number of ways in which they believe Israeli ministers are holding up aid. Even President Biden criticized the Israeli government for not doing its part. As he said in his [State of the Union address](#): "Humanitarian assistance cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip. Protecting and saving innocent lives has to be a priority."

Global dissatisfaction with Israel's performance is coupled with a broad international consensus on the urgency and scale of the crisis. An interagency [report](#) published on March 18, based on a range of data sources, concluded: "Famine is imminent in the northern governorates and projected to occur anytime between mid March and May 2024." Other parts of the territory are not far behind.

The crises of shelter and food are now affecting the Biden administration's willingness to back a major military operation in Rafah, which most Israelis support and which many believe is necessary to topple the Hamas regime in Gaza.

In addition to Israel's failure to adopt a convincing approach to humanitarian issues, and the public blame coming from its closest ally, the international media's portrayal of events is no less significant in the struggle for legitimacy. Israeli media generally does not show the images, names, faces, or even bare numbers of Palestinian civilian casualties that international audiences are exposed to day in and day out.

The immediacy of the horrors will recede, but the images are recorded forever, and they will be used to rekindle memories week after week, year after year, in countless public forums: in the UN and international courts; in legal proceedings against Israeli leaders under universal jurisdiction; in NGO reports; in media analyses; in books, documentaries, plays and films.

In short, the destruction of Gaza is now a permanent and global cultural as well as political item, no less than Hamas's atrocities of October 7. Most prominent of all, Israel now stands in the dock of the ICJ as defendant in a genocide trial that will continue for years.

Israel stands to receive another blow at the ICJ, with the court likely to provide an [advisory opinion](#) that the occupation of "Palestinian Territories" is itself illegal. This potential ruling, combined with the genocide trial, risks giving immeasurable new impetus to the BDS movement. This includes grass roots pressure on Western governments that have traditionally been Israel's most reliable supporters to carefully consider all aspects of their bilateral relations, including arms trade. It also risks escalating pressure on the private sector regarding investing in Israel, especially if economic involvements cannot be guaranteed to remain confined to "legal" Israel inside the Green Line. The impact on public opinion in many Arab, Islamic, and developing world countries is also significant.

### **A fast-shrinking circle of support, including in the US**

Israel will retain some unstinting supporters in the US and Europe, but they will be more confined to the political right as this issue becomes increasingly partisan in many countries. This means the quality of Israel's relations with Western states risks becoming ever more vulnerable to the political attitudes of the party in power and its most vocal activists.

Perhaps most significant of all are the dramatic social, cultural and political changes in the US. American political polarization has exacerbated huge partisan and generational divides. A recent annual Gallup [survey](#) showed an unprecedented drop in 18-34 year olds' favorable view of Israel, from 64% in 2023 to 38% in 2024. Those with a favorable view of the PA also fell, but only from 36% to 32%. These numbers are usually stable, and the drop indicates severe damage to Israel's image.

Once, the center of gravity in the US was assumed to be more pro-Israel than in Europe, with a bipartisan consensus. Today there is a huge gap in attitudes between Republicans and Democrats. Many around Biden want him to be tougher on Israel, and fear his re-election is at stake.

Biden's personal commitment to Israel has therefore been a crucial factor in US policy. He has not unequivocally opposed a Rafah operation, only conditioning it on a credible plan to protect the densely concentrated civilians. Yet unsatisfied by Israel's position, the administration is [considering](#) putting conditions on the use of US weapons. Without regular weapons supplies, it is

not clear that Israel can achieve its objectives, especially while involved in a two-front conflict with Hezbollah that could easily escalate.

Without doubt, a negative consequence of more aid entering the Gaza Strip is that some will go to Hamas. But this consideration is outweighed by the greater military and diplomatic costs associated with not ensuring the entry of sufficient aid. Toppling Hamas therefore depends on being more, not less, concerned with the humanitarian situation. It is overwhelmingly in Israel's interests to help Biden help Gazan civilians.

For anyone who thought Israel can ultimately reduce its dependency on Washington, note that Russia is diving ever deeper into a partnership with Iran, and China appears to have embraced the opportunity to win support in the developing world by casting itself as an honest broker in contrast to “warmongering” Washington's support for Israel. Antisemitism has [reportedly surged](#) in Chinese social media.

### **How Israel can recover**

A better and more secure future for Israel, and indeed the Palestinians, depends on toppling the unspeakably brutal, sadistic, and vicious Hamas regime. Yet the humanitarian crisis is restricting the legitimacy Israel needs to pursue its immediate war aims, including moving into Rafah. In the longer term, the devastation wrought in Gaza stands to leave Israel with immense and lasting reputational damage.

Yet there is a way back if Israel takes it. Success depends on the continued support of President Biden. To help the president help Israel achieve its strategic objectives, Israel must take the initiative and act quickly, vigorously and decisively to improve the humanitarian situation to the very best of its ability. Preventing acute hunger and illness from tipping into mass famine and disease should be treated by Israeli decision makers as not only an overwhelming moral imperative but an overwhelming and immediate strategic imperative. Doing everything possible to address the humanitarian situation should help to soften, if not totally extinguish, American opposition to an operation in Rafah.

Beyond the immediate humanitarian crisis, Israel must grasp the great opportunity offered by the Biden administration's regional proposals. The interest of Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, in contributing to the stabilization of the Israeli-Palestinian arena and the normalization of relations with Israel is an immense opportunity.

By accepting the US call for a diplomatic horizon including a Palestinian state (with all necessary prerequisites, including its demilitarization), and agreeing to a practical step-by-step approach in the civilian realm that does not compromise Israeli security, Israel will create the basis for a substantive discussion on post-Hamas civilian governance for Gaza that can include the Arab states whose cooperation Israel hopes to secure, and enable a long-term strategy to marginalize Palestinian extremists backed by Iran. Down the line, it will rekindle the hope for the immense economic, security and diplomatic dividends associated with normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia. No less importantly, Israel will arm itself with a powerful refutation of accusations of genocide or illegal occupation.

By moving proactively, rather than being dragged, Israel can better shape the process and garner much-needed international credit.

Israel should also move away from the notion, implied in the [“day after” paper](#) that emerged from the prime minister's office, that deradicalization comes before reconstruction. Clearly, the first order of business is toppling Hamas and ensuring security and public order. However, without a credible plan for civilian governance and reconstruction, there will be a vacuum in which Hamas's ideology will continue to thrive.

By contrast, setting out with partners to forge a path to reconstruction creates at least a possibility of demonstrating that there is a better way. In this regard, Israel needs to foster the [best conceivable alternative to Hamas](#). This could, for example, be an Arab-backed mechanism under the umbrella of the Palestinian Authority.

Right now, most Israelis cannot bear to hear, much less speak, the words “Palestinian state”. But if Israel is to dig itself out of the deep strategic hole in which it finds itself, this must change. Neither Biden nor his team are under any illusion that an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement is a realistic proposition in the short to medium term. But they do believe that if the Abraham Accords are to be expanded, there must be a credible diplomatic horizon that includes Palestinian statehood.

There may be little prospect of a Palestinian leadership being willing to seriously advance Palestinian statehood under conditions that even a center-left government could live with. Nonetheless, by aligning Israel's vision of the future, and its policies on the ground, with an approach broadly acceptable to Western capitals and among moderate Arab states, Israel can shift the diplomatic pressure to the Palestinian side. Israel has always benefitted when it has been seen as the side that wants peace and is ready to make reasonable compromises to achieve it, even if the other side lacks the will or ability.

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