

## WHAT IS ISRAEL'S END-GAME IN GAZA?

*Unless Israel establishes an exit strategy and an end-game that will lead to a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in full coordination with the US and Saudi Arabia, the war against Hamas will only be another brutal violent episode that will prepare the ground for the next conflagration that will engulf the West Bank and potentially set the entire region on fire*

Alon Ben-Meir—November 10, 2023

As the Israel-Hamas war grinds on, the international call for a ceasefire or at a minimum a pause in the fighting for a couple of days to allow for the delivery of badly needed necessities is absolutely essential at this juncture. It is glaringly evident that there is growing international sympathy towards the Palestinians, given the magnitude of destruction and loss of life. This humanitarian crisis of such incredible scale is overshadowing the unconscionable slaughter of 1,200 people in Israel and the kidnapping of 248 others. Sadly though, although Israel has the right to self-defense, the campaign to eradicate Hamas is increasingly resembling a war of revenge and retribution. It has caused tremendous destruction and human suffering. After only five weeks, over 11,000 in Gaza have been killed, one-third of them children under the age of 18, there is a horrifying scarcity of food, medicine, water, and fuel, and nearly three-quarters of Gaza's entire population of 2.09 million are now internally [displaced](#).

This calamity is unfolding in front of our eyes must stop, even temporarily, to help save the lives of many of the tens of thousands who are wounded, bury the dead, and avert wide-spread starvation. And even though a temporary cessation of hostilities benefits Hamas, it is still worth undertaking not only to alleviate the horrifying suffering of the entire population in Gaza, but also to open a window for negotiating the release of as many hostages as possible, especially **all women and children**, in exchange for a pause in fighting.

Whereas Israel's stated goal from the onset was and still justifiably is the destruction of Hamas, Israel has not offered as yet any clear exit strategy nor endgame. Once Hamas is completely defeated, which is still a tall order, Israel with the support of the US and Saudi Arabia in particular

will have to offer a sound alternative that meets the Palestinians' aspiration and render Hamas irrelevant.

President Biden should demand that Prime Minister Netanyahu and his military brass develop, **in coordination with the US**, a clear exit strategy and an end-game consistent with Israel's, the Palestinians', the Arab states, and the US' national interests.

The protests that have taken place across major cities in the US and around the world are arguably some of the biggest that we've seen in a long time. These calls for a ceasefire or a pause in the fighting for humanitarian reasons are exerting pressure on Biden to change his near-unconditional support of Israel's war efforts, which he can no longer ignore. This is particularly important because the US' unwavering support of Israel makes the Biden administration complicit to the unfolding tragedy, which is intensely criticized from the ranks of leading Democrats as well.

What should be the end game? I believe there are three possible scenarios, two of which are impractical in a sense that they will not lead to a permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### **Israeli control over Gaza**

**First**, Netanyahu is claiming that he wants to maintain security over Gaza, but he's not saying who will govern and administer the Strip. Does he want to reoccupy all of Gaza or just the northern half, which may explain why he wanted the Palestinians to head south. President Biden is very correct to suggest that the reoccupation of Gaza, be that in part or in full, will be nothing short of a disaster for Israel and will only guarantee the prolongation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Moreover, it should be emphasized here that given Israel's experience in the occupied West Bank, maintaining security was only marginally successful at best as evidenced by the continuing violence between Israeli forces and Palestinians, which has been increasingly escalating. Netanyahu is a fool to assume that he can maintain control over Gaza by establishing a security apparatus when the Hamas-affiliated militants in Gaza will subject the Israeli forces to terrorist attacks that will exact

a heavy toll in blood and treasure. The violence in the West Bank will pale in comparison to what Hamas' militants in Gaza will still be capable of doing against Israeli forces without an end in sight.

### **Resettling Palestinians in Egypt**

**The second** option, which Netanyahu has been exploring with Egypt, would allow the settling of a few hundred thousand Palestinians in the Sinai; Egypt would assume administrative responsibility in Gaza while Israel maintains security. Egyptian President Sisi flatly rejected any future involvement with the Palestinians in Gaza, other than facilitating through the Rafah crossing the passage of people for justifiable reasons as well as the transfer of goods. The Egyptian government considers Hamas a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is outlawed in Egypt. For this reason, Egypt has also blockaded Gaza to prevent the infiltration of Hamas militants into the country.

Moreover, Egypt has troubles of its own. The economy is in a dire situation, and its concerns over security are mounting. Egypt simply does not want to add more to its domestic problems. Thus, they are not interested in any solution that will further burden them with the Palestinians. That said, President Sisi was clear that regardless of how this war ends, a framework for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be established, otherwise it will be only a question of time when this war will invite another.

### **Transitional period for Gaza with UN supervision**

**The third option** may well be more viable as it would entail a transitional period whereby the United Nations would assume responsibility. Administratively, as is well known, UNWRA has been on the ground for decades, providing aid and development services, including education, healthcare, microfinance, and job training. Although it has not been involved in the running of Gaza itself, UNWRA is very familiar with the scene in Gaza. It is familiar with the population's needs, the prevailing socio-economic conditions, and the day-to-day problems Gazans face. UNWRA is in the best possible position to assume greater responsibility under a modified and expanded mandate, provided that it receives the manpower and the funding necessary.

In conjunction with UNWRA's added administrative responsibilities, it will be necessary to establish a peacekeeping force to be in charge of security. This force ought to be *comprised exclusively of the Arab states that are at peace with Israel*, namely the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain, and Morocco, as well as Egypt.

It should be made clear that although post-Hamas the West Bank and Gaza should be governed by the Palestinian Authority (PA), this should not and in fact cannot happen for at least a year to 18 months following the establishment of a UN administrative authority in Gaza. During this period, the Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza would prepare themselves politically for a new election. The current PA is corrupt to the bone; President Abbas is rejected and despised by the majority of Palestinians and must go. Only a new, fresh, and uncorrupt newly-elected leadership that enjoys the confidence of the people can succeed.

On the Israeli side, no one should hold their breath waiting for Netanyahu and his gang of zealous coalition partners to agree on anything that even resembles an independent Palestinian state. Once the war ends, Netanyahu will face an inquiry about the unprecedented disaster that took place under his watch and he will have to resign or be ousted. Here too, a new government will have to be established in Israel which must commit itself from the onset to a two-state solution.

Once the above two prerequisites are in place, the UN administrative authority will then relinquish its role and responsibility to the PA.

The Arab states should condition their commitment to provide a peacekeeping force **upon Israel's acceptance of a two-state solution**. That is, once such a peacekeeping force is created, the process of peacebuilding ought to commence in earnest toward that end. Any interim solution must be used only as a vehicle toward a final resolution, otherwise it would serve as nothing less than a respite from waiting for another disaster to unfold.

### **The role of the US and Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia and the US can play a major, in fact indispensable, role in this regard:

The US has and continues to be the ultimate guarantor of Israel's national security, and President Biden has done more than any of his predecessors in this regard and demonstrated that in the most unambiguous way by his unflagging support of Israel. He must make it very clear (and is in a position to do so) to Netanyahu or his successor that the US' unwavering support bears considerable political cost to America both domestically as well as internationally. Many countries around the world view the US as complicit to the unfolding horror in Gaza. President Biden must put in place a framework for a two-state solution consistent with the above proposal, which he has been advocating for many decades.

The negotiating peace process will certainly take more than year to complete. 2024 is an election year in the US, but regardless of who the next president might be, Biden will have to stick to the plans because another Israeli-Palestinian conflagration will inescapably involve the US. **It's time for the US to put its foot down**, no longer give Israel *carte blanche* to do as it pleases, and condition further support, financial and military, to genuine efforts to negotiate in good faith and reach a peace agreement.

Saudi Arabia can complement the US initiative with its own most significant role by seizing on the breakdown in the Israeli-Palestinian relations and offering an unprecedented breakthrough to bring an end to the conflict. The Saudis should make it clear that once the war ends, they will be ready to normalize relations with Israel on the condition that a new Israeli government agree to a two-state solution and negotiate continuously until an agreement is reached.

This war must end, leaving Hamas dramatically weakened and in disarray. But Hamas' ultimate defeat will not be on the battlefield, it will be by creating an alternative to Hamas' governance from which the Palestinians will greatly benefit. That contrast ought to be made clearly and immediately to demonstrate to the Palestinians that Hamas was not only the enemy of Israel but the enemy of ordinary Palestinians. Yes, all Palestinians in Gaza want to live in peace and prosper but were deprived of living a normal life because of Hamas' violent resistance to Israel, squandering every resource to fight Israel while leaving the people despairing and hopeless.

Israel should not prolong this tragic war by even one unnecessary day. Indeed, if this war lasts another month or two, it is almost certain that 20,000 to 30,000 Palestinians, mostly innocent civilians, and scores of Israeli soldiers will be killed. The continuation of the terrifying death and destruction in Gaza along with Israeli losses will only deepen the hate, enmity, and distrust between Israel and the Palestinians and make a solution to the conflict ever more intractable.

Every Israeli should ask him/herself the painful question: do we want to memorialize the death of 1,200 innocent Israelis butchered by Hamas by killing, however inadvertently, 20,000 Palestinians? Is that how the Israeli victims should be commemorated? This is something that every Israeli needs to think about.

Yes, Israel can and will win every battle against Hamas, but it will lose the war unless a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians begins once the war comes to an end, under the auspices of the US, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt with the support of other Arab states, which must lead to a two-state solution.

*For more information on how a sustainable peace agreement based on a two-state solution can be reached, please refer to my essay in [World Affairs](#), “The Case for an Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian Confederation: Why Now and How?”*