

Israel's Policy Toward the Gaza Strip: Strategic Alternatives

Udi Dekel and Noa Shusterman

Edited by Anat Kurz



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Institute for National Security Studies

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**Institute for National Security
Studies** (a public benefit company)
40 Haim Levanon Street
POB 39950
Ramat Aviv
Tel Aviv 6997556 Israel

Tel. +972-3-640-0400
Fax. +972-3-744-7590
E-mail: info@inss.org.il
<http://www.inss.org.il>

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INTRODUCTION

The Gaza Strip has been in an ongoing crisis since the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in 2005, especially since Hamas took over the territory by force. The situation in Gaza is characterized by economic, social, and infrastructural distress—verging on a humanitarian crisis—and influenced by the political rivalry and struggle for leadership of the Palestinian camp between Hamas on one hand, and Fatah and the Palestinian Authority on the other. Hamas’s inability to provide for the needs of Gaza’s population serves as a motivating factor for its belligerent tendencies and for military escalation between Israel and Hamas and the other terrorist groups active in Gaza. Hamas’s comprehensive and stable control of the territory, along with its proven ability to cause damage, has led to unofficial Israeli recognition of Hamas as the sole body responsible for the Gaza Strip.

Three rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas (2009, 2012, and 2014) have caused wide-scale destruction of civilian infrastructure in Gaza, and socioeconomic collapse of Gaza has continued since then. Israel has imposed a closure on Gaza, which severely restricts the passage of goods and people in and out of the territory. In addition, in recent years, the Palestinian Authority has significantly reduced the transfer of money and has been unwilling to cooperate with the Hamas government.

The increasing distress in Gaza, the sense of being imprisoned, and its lack of a political horizon have made it easy for Hamas to direct the rage of the masses toward Israel; for the past two years, it has been expressed by the “Great March of Return” demonstrations organized along the fence and by constantly harassing the Israeli communities near Gaza with rocket fire, mortar shells, explosive balloons, incendiary kites, and attack drones. In addition, Hamas occasionally has initiated controlled escalation against Israel as a way of trying to force Israel to reduce the pressure on Gaza and to place the blame on Israel for Gaza’s distress.

In order to address the challenge that the Gaza Strip poses—due to its dark future, the negative consequences for Israel’s security, as well as the deteriorating sense of personal safety in communities near the southern border and beyond—the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) created a professional research group for the purpose of suggesting policy that meets the State of Israel’s diplomatic and defense objectives while relieving the severe problem of the Gaza Strip. During the process of analyzing and formulating recommendations, five main alternatives were examined—most of which have been raised in the public and military discourse—under the lens of how they serve and advance Israel’s interests. This document summarizes the deliberations and research process and imparts the main insights found.

On January 28, 2020, after this study was first published, President Donald Trump revealed his peace plan, also referred to as the “Deal of the Century.” According to Trump’s plan, the solution for Gaza requires that Hamas and the other terrorist organizations should be disarmed, Gaza should be demilitarized, and the Palestinian Authority should regain control over the territory. Over the past decade, multiple international bodies attempted to advance these objectives, offering economic and political incentives, yet none reached a breakthrough. In the foreseeable future, under the premise that a drastic political change in the Palestinian arena is unlikely to occur, fulfilling the objectives presented in the plan does not seem probable, while the problem of Gaza will not disappear or dwindle. The political division between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and between Fatah and Hamas will not change in response to the “Deal of the Century.” For this reason, Israel should continue to pursue a deliberate strategy to tackle the challenge of the Gaza Strip, while taking into account the overall context of the Palestinian arena.

The researchers who participated in the research group specialize in topics related to the Palestinian and regional arenas and have many years of experience dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some of them were active participants in recent decades in the rounds of negotiations and various talks with the Palestinians. The members of the team were Dr. Kobi Michael, Col. (res.), Adv. Pnina Sharvit Baruch, Mr. Yohanan Tzoreff, Dr. Anat Kurz, Brig. Gen. (ret.) Shlomo Brom, Lt. Colonel (ret.) Orna Mizrahi, Ms. Ruth Pines, Ambassador Dr. Oded Eran, Col. (res.) Adv. Gilead Sher, Brig. Gen. (res.) Assaf Orion, Ms. Noa Shusterman, and Brig. Gen. (res.) Udi Dekel.

PART 1: THE STRATEGIC CHALLENGE AND THE MILITARY AND DIPLOMATIC RESPONSE

The Gaza Strip is exceptional in the Palestinian arena due to its modern history and its geographic, demographic, and political characteristics. Gaza's unique behavior and its influence on both Israel and Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank began more than a decade ago, following Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005 and Hamas's takeover in 2007. Under Hamas's control, the Gaza Strip has, over the years, developed into a semi-state arena that is separate and independent from the PA and poses unique threats and challenges to Israel. During this time, the Israeli government has implemented a policy of differentiation and division between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in order to weaken Hamas's military buildup capabilities and to diplomatically challenge both Hamas and the PA. This policy has contributed to the substantive separation that has developed between the two parts of the Palestinian territory, during which Hamas has consolidated its standing in Gaza and has become sovereign there. Hamas's military buildup and the increasing disconnect between Gaza and the West Bank have created two rival and distinct governing systems that cannot cooperate or set shared goals and instead compete with one another for the leadership of the Palestinian people and for setting the Palestinian national agenda vis-à-vis Israel.

Figure 1. Israel's policy alternatives toward Hamas in Gaza



Over the past decade, the diplomatic discourse in Israel has focused on three main strategic alternatives for dealing with the Gaza Strip: overthrowing Hamas's rule; leaving a weakened and deterred Hamas in power; and recognizing in practice Hamas's rule and providing aid for Gaza's reconstruction, even though this means consolidating Hamas's rule. Israel constantly wavers between the second and third possibilities,

sometimes choosing to promote military stability by achieving understandings or an arrangement with Hamas and sometimes working to block reconstruction efforts in Gaza out of concern for strengthening Hamas and its rule and enabling it to continue its military buildup. In order to weaken Hamas, Israel has applied a closure on Gaza and responds to missile attacks almost routinely with pinpoint strikes in Gaza. On three occasions in the past decade, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had been on the verge of large-scale operations in Gaza. At the same time, as part of ceasefire and stability arrangements, Israel has reached understandings with Hamas on several occasions, aimed at achieving security calm in order to ease the closure on Gaza, which in practice mean Israel's recognition of Hamas's responsibility over Gaza.

Israel's dynamic policy of accommodation and deterrence has eroded since March 2018 when Hamas successfully began turning popular protests in Gaza, which occurred as a result of the distress and the sense of being imprisoned, into massive demonstrations ("The Great March of Return") and into attempts to carry out attacks against Israel. This has provided Hamas with leverage to pressure Israel and with the ability to control the escalation, based on the assessment that Israel does not want the situation to reach the point of a large-scale military operation and does not see an alternative to Hamas's ruling in Gaza.

As long as Hamas controls Gaza without any positive and significant diplomatic process with the PA and the PA does not strengthen its own control and institutions, the chances of the PA's returning to rule in Gaza decrease, at least in the foreseeable future. Attempts to promote reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, with Egyptian mediation, have not succeeded at resolving the conflict between them, which would reinstate the administrative control of the PA in the Gaza Strip. At the end of 2017, the two sides were close to agreeing on reconciliation, but it was thwarted due to Hamas's opposition to dismantling its military wing, or at least to giving up its independence in exercising power, while Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the PA, opposed the creation of a Hezbollah-type situation in Gaza and demanded the implementation of his vision of "one authority, one law, one weapon."¹

On more than one occasion in 2019, Israel was ready to undertake a military operation in Gaza but always refrained in the end due to the short- and long-term implications and consequences of this step. In practice, Israel's policy regarding the Gaza Strip enables Hamas—an armed, hostile entity that directly and constantly threatens Israel—to consolidate its standing and its rule in the territory.

¹ Gal Berger, "Senior Palestinian Authority Official to Kan News: Reconciliation Talks in Cairo Fail Completely," *Kan, the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation*, November 27, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/vmqyp3a> [in Hebrew].

Despite both the direct and constant military threat to Israel from the Gaza Strip and the repeated rounds of violence between Israel and Hamas and the rogue organizations active in Gaza, at present there is not any in-depth public discussion in Israel on policy alternatives toward the Gaza resolution and about Israel's strategic objectives in the Palestinian arena in general and in the Gaza Strip in particular. Consequently, the INSS decided to establish a research group composed of twelve experts to examine strategic alternatives regarding the Gaza Strip, assess their feasibility, formulate insights indicative of the preferred alternative, and place it on the agenda of the Israeli public and decision makers.

In the analysis process carried out at the INSS, five possible diplomatic and military alternatives were examined for addressing the military challenge that the Gaza Strip in general and Hamas in particular pose for Israel:

1. **Managing the conflict**, based on the logic of adjustment and deterrence. This alternative means exerting ongoing pressure on Hamas to weaken it and achieve longer-term calm by strengthening deterrence.
2. **An extended ceasefire (calm—"tahadiya") between Israel and Hamas** based on the logic of an agreement. This alternative means recognizing Hamas as the sole body responsible for Gaza.
3. **Completely disconnecting the Gaza Strip from Israel and from the West Bank** based on the logic of disengagement. This alternative would lead to closing the crossings between the Gaza Strip and Israel and providing Gaza with access to the sea and to the Sinai Peninsula.
4. **Military operation to overthrow Hamas's military wing** in accordance with the logic of military victory. After defeating Hamas, steps would need to be carried out that would aim to stabilize and influence the territory. This alternative could also be a platform for advancing other alternatives, such as maintaining Hamas's rule but in a weakened state, or creating the conditions for returning the PA to Gaza so that it becomes the body responsible there, or establishing an international trusteeship in Gaza (the chances of the last option being realized are extremely low).
5. **Creating conditions for intra-Palestinian reconciliation and supporting steps in this direction** in accordance with the logic that any agreement must only be conducted with the PA, as it should be seen as the only body that represents all of the Palestinian camp.

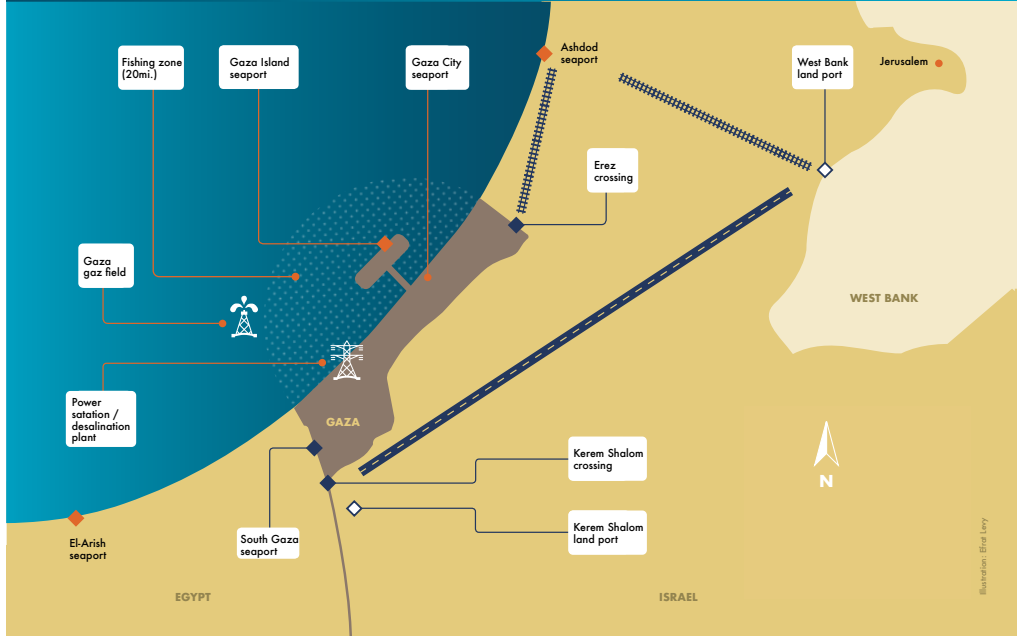
At the end of the analysis process, it became clear that there is no magic solution for positively, substantively changing the situation in the Gaza Strip. However, it also became apparent that the most preferable and most capable alternative of being realized is establishing a long-term ceasefire between Israel and Hamas with Egyptian mediation. Such a ceasefire would include easing the closure on Gaza and advancing infrastructure projects in the area.

The Research Process

Based on the current situation, basic assumptions were formulated for mapping out the alternatives that Israel can pursue regarding the Gaza Strip and for selecting the preferred alternative:

1. Israel has, in practice, come to terms with the fact that Hamas is sovereign in the Gaza Strip and sees it as the body responsible for all that occurs there. According to Israel, this reality is the reason that Israel is unable to begin a peace process with the PA.
2. As long as Hamas is in power in Gaza and Mahmoud Abbas is the president of the PA, there is only a slim chance of formulating and implementing a reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah and restoring the PA's rule in Gaza.
3. Israel's policy of differentiation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has considerably weakened both parts of the Palestinian system—the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip; however, the connection between the two territories is still pertinent.
4. The rounds of violence between Israel and Hamas have encouraged the military buildup of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and have assisted Hamas in strengthening its grip on the territory.
5. The humanitarian distress in the Gaza Strip causes instability and increases Hamas's motivation to escalate the conflict with Israel. Hamas uses this mounting distress to force Israel to ease the closure and reduce the pressure on Gaza as well as to focus regional and international attention on Gaza and place the blame for the situation on Israel.
6. Hamas has enhanced and diversified its attack capabilities (from incendiary kites to attack drones, from short-range rockets to medium-range missiles). The continued "incidents on the fence," along the demarcation line between the Gaza Strip and Israeli territory, reflect Israel's loss of control over events in Gaza and increases the risk of a military escalation.

Figure 2. Plans for improving infrastructure and commerce in the Gaza Strip



7. Hamas has the capacity to impose its authority over the rogue organizations in Gaza—chiefly the PIJ, as well as Salafi-jihadist groups—even though it does not have complete control over them.
8. Despite Israel’s disengagement from Gaza and the dismantling of its settlements from there, the international community sees Israel as being responsible for the Gaza Strip. This approach stems not only from the closure that Israel has imposed on Gaza but also from the Oslo Accords, which determined that the West Bank and Gaza Strip are a single territorial unit, and also because the Israeli-Palestinian issue still remains unresolved.
9. Changing the condition of Gaza’s infrastructure requires massive investment that can only come from regional and international aid. Currently, transferring money from the international community for Gaza’s reconstruction is only possible with the involvement of the PA since the international aid groups consider the PA as the legitimate Palestinian government. At the same time, the PA is interested in weakening Hamas and reduces the budgets transferred to Gaza. In this respect, the transfer of aid for reconstructing Gaza would notably contribute to strengthening Hamas at the expense of Fatah and the PA.
10. The Gaza Strip is one of the most crowded places in the world: Some 2 million people live within an area of 365 km. The unemployment rate in Gaza is over 50

percent,² and the severe shortage of land reserves makes the dream of reconstruction almost impossible to realize.

11. Egypt has a central and unique role to play, as the sole mediator between Israel and Hamas and between the PA and Hamas.

The Strategic Problem vis-à-vis the Palestinian Arena

Israel's policy in the Gaza Strip is connected to its policy toward the entire Palestinian arena and influences its relationship with the PA. There are currently two leading ideological-political approaches in Israel regarding the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

1. There is no Palestinian partner for formulating and implementing a comprehensive agreement. Time is in Israel's favor, and Israel should examine the consequences of the regional upheaval for the Palestinian arena before taking the risks involved in establishing an independent Palestinian state.
2. Israel's "managing" the conflict and its lack of effort to reach an agreement with the PA greatly reduces the chances of achieving a comprehensive settlement in the future and will deteriorate into a one-state reality in which Israel will not be able to separate from the Palestinians.

Given the schism that exists in Israel regarding which policy to implement on the Palestinian issue, the Israeli government has been unable to formulate clear objectives that optimally address Israel's interests and consider the widest possible common denominator. Furthermore, due to the difficulty reconciling the opposing approaches, the Israeli government has a limited range of options regarding Hamas, the Gaza Strip, and the PA. Under these circumstances, the Israeli government has addressed the challenges of terrorism originating from the Gaza Strip through a tactical short-term—and not a strategic long-term—perspective.

Israel's policy toward the Gaza Strip reflects four main logics that are not always compatible:

1. The logic of an arrangement, according to which Israel seeks to reach diplomatic settlements—ideally bilaterally—with the Palestinians.
2. The logic of separation, by which Israel will take steps—independently if necessary—to separate from the Palestinians on all levels: political, demographic, civil, and territorial.

² The World Bank, "Economic Monitoring Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee," April 30, 2019, pp. 6–7, <https://tinyurl.com/wehjqqq>.

Figure 3. Ways to reconstruct the Gaza Strip

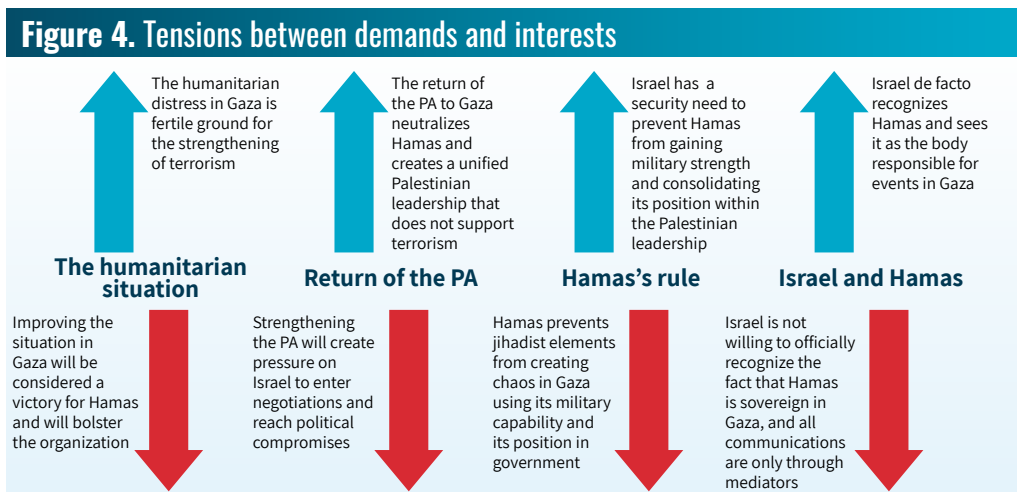


3. The logic of accommodation and deterrence, according to which Israel is coping with the reality in the Gaza Strip without having any clear vision to change it. At most, Israel carries out military actions whose entire purpose is to maintain deterrence and prevent Hamas and other terror groups from gaining military strength. This logic derives from the conception that Israel does not have a practical and reliable partner for a diplomatic process; thus, it must maintain the current situation of isolated autonomy in the Gaza Strip, while deepening its control over the majority of the territory of Judea and Samaria. In practice, Israel has created an increasing number of facts on the ground in Judea and Samaria, and deliberations over partial and complete annexation of these territories is already underway in some circles within Israel's leadership.
4. The logic of military victory, according to which Israel must dismantle Hamas's military wing by means of a large-scale military operation and afterwards enforce the demilitarization of Gaza. According to this logic, Hamas's political wing—albeit weakened and deterred—must be kept in power to serve as the body responsible for the population, since the PA does not want and cannot retake control of the Gaza Strip, mainly with the help of the IDF.

Israel's Interests and the Correlating Tension

1. Maintaining stability and calm in the arena.
2. Not granting legitimacy to Hamas—despite recognizing it as the de facto responsible body ruling Gaza.
3. Preferring that the Gaza Strip be controlled by the PA, which opposes terrorism, and supporting intra-Palestinian reconciliation and a Palestinian unity government.
4. Preventing Hamas from consolidating additional power in Gaza but compromising in the short term with its continued rule there, and thus seeing it as the sole body that is preventing chaos or a jihadist takeover.
5. Strengthening the PA's standing in the West Bank by adopting the approach that it is the only legitimate Palestinian government and strengthening its relevance as a future partner for negotiations with Israel.
6. Maintaining the principle of differentiation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and reducing the negative impact of events in Gaza on events in the West Bank. Such a stance dictates opposing intra-Palestinian reconciliation and reducing the PA's influence on events in Gaza.
7. Bringing about an international reconstruction plan for the Gaza Strip to prevent the development of a humanitarian crisis, despite the understanding that a reconstruction plan contributes to strengthening Hamas.
8. Reaching strategic understandings with Egypt and achieving cooperation in the fight against terrorism and extremists.

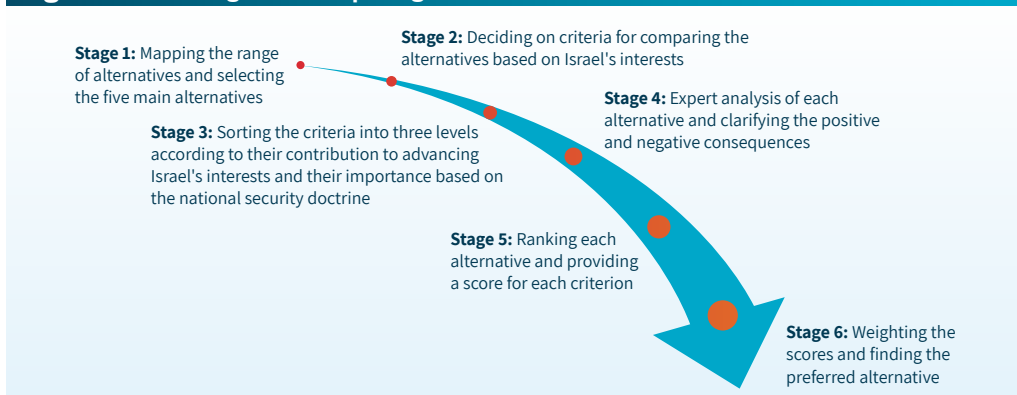
Israel's policy is influenced by a series of structural tensions that limit its range in maneuvering on the issue of Gaza. The tension between demands and interests is evident on all levels, as shown below in figure 4.



PART 2: METHODOLOGY OF COMPARING THE ALTERNATIVES

In the first stage, in order to address the strategic dilemma, we conducted a comparative assessment of the various alternatives that Israel could pursue vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip. These are alternatives that match the different logics, meet diplomatic and defense interests, and have a broad base of public support. In order to take into account the mood of the Israeli public, the researchers used findings from public opinion polls conducted by the INSS and published as part of the National Security Index. In the second stage, the alternatives were assessed vis-à-vis the challenges in the Gaza Strip in accordance with possible developments, Israel's interest, and the ability to implement them.

Figure 5. The stages of comparing the alternatives



The first stage involves mapping the various alternatives and selecting the four main alternatives that are within the control of the Israeli government and one alternative that is not within Israel's control, yet which Israel can influence and has some degree of feasibility, justifying its examination. The five alternatives are as follows:

1. **Managing the conflict** in accordance with the logic of adjustment and deterrence. Implementing this alternative means strengthening and maintaining deterrence as a tool for exerting ongoing pressure on Hamas in order to weaken it and achieve calm.
2. **Extended ceasefire between Israel and Hamas (“*tahadiya*”)** according to the logic of an arrangement. Choosing this alternative means recognizing Hamas as the sole body responsible for Gaza.

3. **Completely disconnecting the Gaza Strip from Israel and from the West Bank** according to the logic of disengagement. Choosing this alternative means closing crossings between Gaza and Israel and enabling Gaza a sea outlet and access to the Sinai Peninsula.
4. **Military operation to overthrow Hamas's military wing** according to the logic of military victory. Choosing this alternative requires follow-up steps with the aim of influencing and stabilizing the Gaza Strip. This alternative can also be a platform for advancing another alternative, such as maintaining Hamas's rule but in a very weakened state, or creating the conditions for returning the PA to Gaza and making it the responsible body there, or establishing an international trusteeship in Gaza (an option whose likelihood is very slim).
5. **Creating conditions for intra-Palestinian reconciliation and supporting steps in this direction** according to the logic of an arrangement; in this alternative, the PA is the only body that represents the Palestinian camp.

In the second stage, uniform criteria were defined for comparing between the alternatives based on the interests of the State of Israel. The criteria reflected Israel's national security doctrine: maintaining the character of the state (Jewish and democratic); achieving military stability and calm over time; avoiding escalation into a large-scale war; shaping internationally recognized borders; and maintaining Israel's levers of influence, aside from military might.

In the third stage, criteria were sorted into three levels according to their contribution to advancing Israel's interests and based on their importance according to the national security doctrine:

1. **The highest essential level, with the greatest priority**
 - A. Improving the stability in the West Bank and strengthening the PA's status and functionality;
 - B. Demise of the alternative will not make the situation worse than the current reality;
 - C. Designating a single responsible, functioning authority in the Gaza Strip.
2. **The intermediate important level, with medium priority**
 - A. Maintaining the strategic relations with Egypt and with Jordan;
 - B. Preventing Hamas's military buildup;
 - C. Maintaining a variety of tools of influence in Israel's hands;

D. The alternative does not close the door for the possibility of a comprehensive diplomatic settlement in the future.

1. **The lowest desirable level, with low priority**

- A. Having the ability to recruit external aid for the reconstruction and development of the Gaza Strip;
- B. Having the feasibility of implementing the alternative within the Israeli political system;
- C. Preventing the humanitarian collapse in the Gaza Strip;
- D. Strengthening Israel's international and regional standing;
- E. Reducing Israel's responsibility for the Gaza Strip.

In the fourth stage, each alternative was analyzed. The analysis was conducted by an expert in the field, and it focused on clarifying the positive and negative consequences of each alternative.

In the fifth stage, the alternatives were ranked based on the analysis, and each criterion was given a score from 1 to 5. This tested their sensitivity; that is, whether there is a gap between the results of the qualitative analysis, which was done in the research group, and the quantitative results received by each researcher individually.

In the sixth stage, the scores provided for each alternative were weighted, and the alternatives were ranked.

Figure 6. The map of the alternatives: Logics and feasibility

<p>Managing the conflict</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This alternative fits the logic of accommodation and deterrence ▪ Enables continued Israeli influence with a "carrot and stick" policy (easing or intensifying the closure) ▪ Israel remains the responsible party in the eyes of the international community ▪ Enables continued strengthening of Iranian influence ▪ Creates a dynamic atmosphere of alternating periods of calm and escalation
<p>Unilaterally disconnecting Gaza from Israel</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This alternative complements the logic of the disengagement ▪ Requires closing the crossings into Israel and ensuring Gaza's maritime access and to the Sinai Peninsula ▪ Total disconnection has many implementation challenges; it would be a lengthy process that would involve a lot of friction with the local population ▪ Creates fertile ground for increased Iranian influence via economic aid ▪ Increases the danger of hostile groups gaining strength ▪ Enables Hamas's continued military buildup and the consolidation of its sovereignty
<p>Creating the conditions for intra-Palestinian reconciliation and supporting it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This is the preferred way to return the Palestinian Authority to the Gaza Strip ▪ The implementation of this alternative is not in Israel's hands ▪ This does not address the problem of the existence of Hamas's military wing and its continued buildup ▪ This alternative depends on the existence of an armed restraining mechanism that would be subject to the Palestinian Authority ▪ This alternative could complement—with low probability—the alternative of disconnection or military victory
<p>Extended ceasefire arrangement in return for significantly easing the closure of Gaza</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fits the logic of reaching a settlement with Hamas ▪ Provides legitimacy to Hamas as the sole body responsible for Gaza—which could be considered de facto recognition by Israel ▪ Does not prevent Hamas's continued military buildup ▪ Igniting the process is difficult to achieve and subsequently to maintain it ▪ Could weaken the Palestinian Authority—a development that could have negative consequences in the West Bank
<p>Defeating Hamas militarily in a large-scale operation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fits the logic of military victory, needs to be complemented by stabilization and the shaping of Gaza ▪ Creates a platform for a very weakened Hamas government ▪ Alternatively, creates the conditions for the return of the Palestinian Authority to the Gaza Strip (low probability), or for the establishment of an international trusteeship (very slim probability) ▪ The campaign itself has a high feasibility, but each of the subsequent processes have a low feasibility ▪ This is the only alternative that prevents Hamas's military buildup

PART 3: ANALYZING THE ALTERNATIVES

Managing the Conflict



Outline

Continuing the current policy of managing the conflict and adapting to changes, along with an effort to control the levels of escalation vis-à-vis Hamas through individual military actions. This alternative means coming to terms with the fact that Hamas is sovereign in the Gaza Strip—albeit weakened and deterred—and that a continuous effort must be made to delay its military buildup and to reduce as much as possible the direct impact of this situation on Israel (rounds of fighting) as well as the indirect impact (costs). A central element of this policy is intensifying the differentiation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, along with weakening the two parts of the Palestinian system—the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza—which would allow creating political and territorial facts on the ground and delay the possibility of a return to negotiations with the PA.³



Strengths

1. Hamas, which would remain the sole body responsible for the Gaza Strip, would continue to manage the civilian and military aspects of the Gaza Strip.
2. The differentiation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip would keep the residents of Gaza out of the demographic equation in a future Israeli-Palestinian agreement, or in any independent Israeli action, such as annexing territories in Judea and Samaria.
3. The existence of an autonomous Hamas government in the Gaza Strip is compatible with the logic of Israel creating facts on the ground, as it enables advancing plans to annex territories in Area C in the West Bank, while the Palestinians self-govern over the majority of their population.

3 At a meeting of the Likud caucus on March 11, 2019, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu defended the decision to allow the transfer of money from Qatar to the Hamas government in Gaza, claiming that maintaining the division between Gaza and the West Bank prevents the establishment of a Palestinian state. See Lahav Harkov, “Netanyahu: Money to Hamas Part of Strategy to Keep Palestinians Divided,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 12, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/vxzkfcm>.

4. Hamas's focus on Gaza and its efforts to consolidate its rule delay—and perhaps prevent—the expansion of its influence in the West Bank and therefore in the entire Palestinian system.
5. Israel's control over the entry of goods and the provision of electricity and water in the Gaza Strip prevents a humanitarian collapse there.
6. Economic and military leverage in Israel's hands enables it to impose its will on Hamas, to contain escalation events, and to maintain longer-term military stability and calm using hard and soft power.
7. Hamas—even if it is weakened, deterred, and restrained—effectively rules Gaza, restrains other terrorist groups, and thus prevents chaos or takeover by more extreme groups, such as PIJ or Salafi-jihadist groups.
8. As Israel continues to implement this alternative, it does not have to change its policy and enact controversial measures that include the investment of considerable resources. Delaying the diplomatic step allows political flexibility and abstention from making difficult decisions.

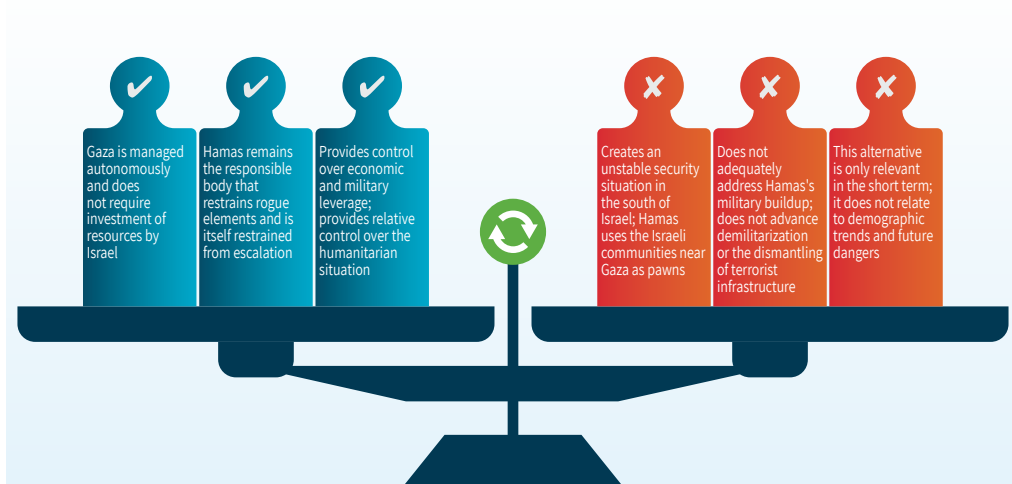
Hamas is aware that as long as it implements a strategy of harassment (small amounts of rocket fire, sporadic attempts to penetrate into Israel, attacks from the air using drones and explosive balloons), it challenges Israel below the threshold of a large-scale military conflict, and it thus can continue to extort Israel while maintaining its power and its rule.

Weaknesses

1. The alternative does not address the increasing insecurity of areas within Israeli territory near the Gaza Strip, which includes the area of the security fence, the region near the border with Gaza, the south of Israel, and the maritime area.
2. This alternative does not address Israel's demand to stop Hamas's military buildup or create conditions for demilitarizing the Gaza Strip in accordance with the interim agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), or based on a long-term settlement.
3. This alternative does not correspond to Israel's current defense doctrine, according to which an ongoing campaign should be waged to dismantle terrorist infrastructure and maintain military control along the border in order to prevent its military buildup.

- The alternative focuses on the short term and ignores long-term demographic and infrastructural trends: the collapsing infrastructure, the lack of almost any potable water, the mounting unemployment, and rising birth rates, which have already turned the Gaza Strip into a “pressure cooker” and a “time bomb.” All of these, in addition to the closure, create a sense of imprisonment and instills a lack of hope among the residents of Gaza.

Figure 7. Strengths and weaknesses of the alternative of managing the conflict



In summary, the conclusion that arises from weighing the advantages and disadvantages of managing the conflict is that this alternative maintains instability as it does not strive for a solution or, at least, for relieving the problem. Implementing a strategy of managing the conflict ensures relative military calm, but occasionally this is violated by Hamas and the rogue organizations. Hamas is aware that as long as it implements a strategy of harassment (small amounts of rocket fire, sporadic attempts to penetrate into Israel, attacks from the air using drones and incendiary balloons), it challenges Israel below the threshold of a large-scale military conflict, and it thus can continue to extort Israel while maintaining its power and its rule. Although Israel holds economic and existential leverage over Gaza (the provision of electricity and water), it is forced to apply it sparingly, as a significant economic improvement would benefit Hamas and strengthen it. This is one of the reasons Israel is limited in its ability to control the level of escalation. Indeed, on several occasions during 2018–2019, the Israeli government was close to deciding on large-scale military operation in Gaza.

An Extended Ceasefire Arrangement in Return for Significantly Easing the Closure on Gaza



Outline

Both Israel and Hamas recoil at the concept of an “arrangement” that would include mutual recognition and provide the adversary with legitimacy. Therefore, it is more convenient for them to use the term “understandings” or “semi-formal arrangement.” In the negotiations that have been ongoing for many months between Israel and Hamas, via Egyptian mediation, understandings are being developed regarding a lengthy period of restraint in return for a large-scale easing of the closure of Gaza. The PA is not involved in these talks and is not expected to be a party to the agreement—if it is achieved. The desire is to reach a five-to-ten-year ceasefire as part of the arrangement, which would enable the rebuilding of Gaza’s infrastructure and creating employment centers. The ceasefire is meant to include the cessation of all forms of fire toward Israel (rockets, explosive drones, incendiary balloons, and so forth) as well as the cessation of violent demonstrations along the border fence. In addition, the agreement ideally will include the return of all of Israelis—living and dead—held by Hamas, in return for freeing Hamas’s prisoners, especially those whom Israel had released as part of the Gilad Shalit deal and then re-arrested.



Strengths

1. The stability of the alternative—and thus inevitably also the stability of the security situation—would depend on significantly improving the humanitarian crisis and the quality of life in Gaza. This would require allowing increased entry and exit of goods and workers through land crossings, the establishment of employment and commerce areas on the border, and even beginning the construction of a seaport, subject to agreement on the operational security mechanisms.
2. The arrangement alternative would require that Hamas prevent terrorist activities by rogue organizations, which would certainly try to undermine the stability of the ceasefire.
3. At the current time, Hamas’s leadership in Gaza has been pragmatic, as a result of its continued responsibility for a population of two million people. Hamas’s leadership is interested to reach and implement understandings—first and foremost with Israel—that would enable it to provide for the needs of Gaza’s residents, even at the cost of reducing the use of violent resistance.

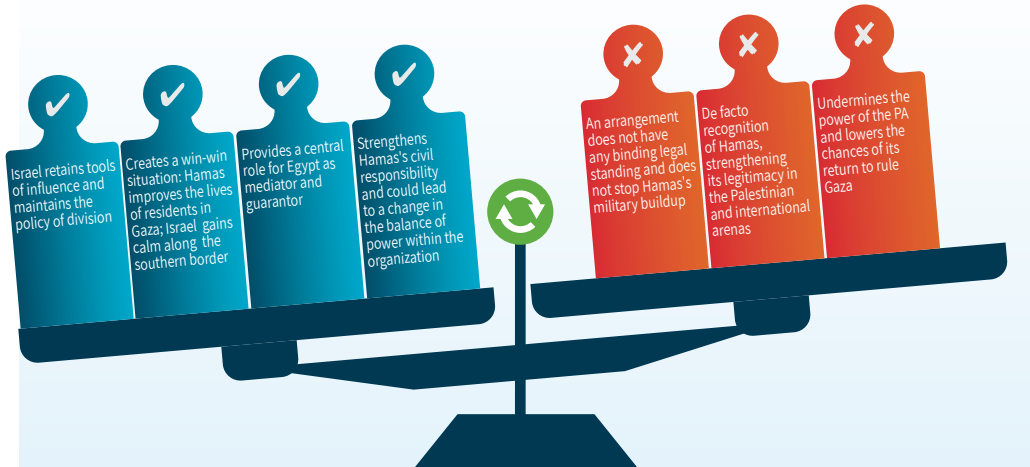
- If Hamas would receive enticing offers for an arrangement, it most likely would strengthen the influence of the pragmatic political leadership at the expense of the belligerent military wing and help them impose a ceasefire.
4. Egypt has a central role: It should serve both as a mediator in negotiations and as a guarantor for implementing the arrangement. Inter alia, Egypt would need to combat the smuggling of illicit items into Gaza, especially firearms; that is, it would need to play a key role in the mechanism of supervising Hamas's military buildup.
 5. An arrangement would make it possible to provide for the immediate needs of each side, including long-term stable security and de-escalation for Israel and the ongoing provision of basic needs for the residents of Gaza. Improving Gaza's situation is a clear Israeli interest, as the humanitarian situation in Gaza is verging on collapse, and there is a danger that ultimately Israel will bear the burden of dealing with it.
 6. An arrangement would not weaken Israel's economic and military levers of influence over Gaza. In addition, Israel would be able to maintain its policy of differentiation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.



Weaknesses

1. An arrangement between Israel and Hamas would inevitably weaken the standing and power of the PA, and as a result, the chances of returning Gaza to its control would decrease. The PA might even try to sabotage the implementation of the arrangement by not transferring funds to Gaza and especially by blocking the transfer of contributions to infrastructure projects.
2. It is impossible to reach an arrangement that includes dismantling Hamas's military wing and demilitarizing Gaza. Israel would try to set conditions for stopping the military buildup, but it would be unable to enforce this demand without damaging the stability of the arrangement. In this situation, Hamas would be able to maintain and even improve its military strength.
3. A formal or informal arrangement with Hamas would strengthen its legitimacy and serve as de facto recognition, and it could exploit the calm and the reconstruction activities to build up its military strength unhindered and to continue its efforts to take over the entire Palestinian political system.
4. Formal understandings or an unofficial arrangement would not be a legally binding diplomatic agreement and would likely be difficult to enforce over time and to maintain a mechanism for supervising and rectifying violations. The challenge of implementing the understandings would increase if the external or internal conditions changed, leading the sides to shift their interests.

Figure 8. Balance of strengths and weaknesses of the arrangement alternative




In summary, the alternative that includes an extended ceasefire arrangement has a high level of feasibility. In effect, this is the direction that the Israeli government and Hamas's leadership are moving toward, and in their view, it is a desirable stage, after managing the conflict. In May 2019, Israel and Hamas—with Egyptian and Qatari mediation—reached understandings regarding military non-belligerency in return for easing the closure. The fact that Hamas sat on the fence and did not participate in the escalation that took place between Israel and the PIJ in November 2019 shows that Hamas is ready for an arrangement. However, an arrangement in the format currently being advanced by the Israeli government weakens the PA while it simultaneously bolsters terrorist organizations and maintains the separation between the two Palestinian entities.⁴

Implementation of this alternative without taking appropriate steps vis-à-vis the PA would strengthen Hamas, provide legitimacy to violent resistance organizations, and would favor their way over the non-violent path of the PA. Israel needs to take steps that would help the PA maintain the balance of power in its favor and keep the door open for the possibility of the PA returning to manage the Gaza Strip.

⁴ Shlomi Eldar, "The Arrangement Will Distance Gaza from Ramallah," *Al-Monitor*, December 10, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/r27nhph>.

The probability of a ceasefire continuing for many years is not high and the PA would need considerable compensation for not undermining—and perhaps even assisting—Gaza’s reconstruction efforts. In order to avoid weakening the PA and crippling its public standing in the Palestinian arena, Israel would need to take diplomatic steps to show that it continues to see the PA as the sole Palestinian representative for future negotiations and in the international arena. In addition, Israel must ensure a role for the PA in the reconstruction of Gaza. In order to prevent the rogue organizations from gaining strength and to prevent any undermining of the stability of the West Bank—such as by the security forces that cooperate with Israel in thwarting terrorism—Israel must reward the PA leadership in order to show its advantages over Hamas’s rule. Implementation of this alternative without taking appropriate steps vis-à-vis the PA would strengthen Hamas, provide legitimacy to violent resistance organizations, and would favor their way over the non-violent path of the PA. Israel needs to take steps that would help the PA maintain the balance of power in its favor and keep the door open for the possibility of the PA returning to manage the Gaza Strip.



Creating Conditions for Intra-Palestinian Reconciliation



Outline

This alternative involves implementing a reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah upon the principles of resolving their disputes and reuniting the Palestinian system. The main aspects of the agreement would include transferring civil management of the Gaza Strip to the PA (this issue has already been discussed in the past between the sides) and the establishment of a government based on professional ministers (technocrats) who would be acceptable to both sides. Despite the PA's desire to make Hamas's military wing subordinate to its security forces, it is unlikely that Hamas would agree. At most, Hamas would agree to the establishment of a coordination mechanism for exercising force and restraining the rogue organizations, as long as it would maintain its military capabilities; however, Hamas would have to agree not to exercise them without prior coordination with the PA.



Strengths

1. While Hamas would have to give up its governance over Gaza, it would be relieved of the burden of its responsibility for civil and economic management. As soon as the PA assumes responsibility for the Gaza Strip, it would remove the sanctions that it imposed on the Hamas leadership and cancel all of the steps taken to impede the living conditions of Gaza's population, including the obstruction of essential infrastructure projects.
2. The two organizations would work to establish a coordination mechanism to restrain belligerent factions currently active in Gaza. The goal of this mechanism would be to maintain calm and stability.
3. The international community would make the transfer of aid for the reconstruction of Gaza and the improvement of the quality of life contingent upon the PA's role as the governing body. Therefore, reconciliation would advance many infrastructure reconstruction projects and the creation of workplaces in the Gaza Strip and in northern Sinai.
4. Israel would continue to have levers of influence over the situation in Gaza. In return for a commitment by the PA and Hamas to respect previous agreements that were signed with Israel, as well as respecting the demand for non-belligerency, Israel would be able to provide many concessions that would aid efforts to rehabilitate and build governing infrastructure in Gaza. These

- include the passage of people and goods, increasing agricultural exports, providing permits to work in Israel, expanding the fishing area, increasing electricity quotas, and providing gas and medical supplies. In addition, Israel would be able to assist (even if not directly) by recruiting an international and regional economic aid package for long-term infrastructural projects. The implementation of such plans could significantly influence the sides' success in maintaining the conditions of the reconciliation. In contrast, if Israel chooses to prevent reconciliation between the Palestinian camps, it could withdraw from previous understandings and even suspend relations with the Palestinian government, for example if the latter does not fulfill the Quartet's conditions. Another condition that Israel could uphold is the receiving of an Egyptian and inter-Arab guarantee to prevent Hamas's military buildup and its takeover of the PLO's mechanisms.
5. Reconciliation between the Palestinian camps meets the wishes of the majority of the Palestinian public. Public support would help the senior Palestinian officials to approve the reconciliation principles and to adhere to them over time, despite the opposition of certain Palestinian organizations.
 6. Intra-Palestinian reconciliation would weaken the influence of the PIJ in the Palestinian arena and thus diminish Iran's influence in Gaza. In addition, reconciliation would neutralize Hamas's cooperation with jihadist elements in the Sinai Peninsula. These elements would likely try to undermine non-belligerency clauses and the process of rehabilitating Gaza, but a combined effort by Israel, Egypt, and the PA could minimize damages and even strengthen the PA's determination to continue as a responsible and functioning body.
 7. Addressing a single Palestinian leadership would be advantageous for Israel when it wishes to return to the path of diplomatic agreements.



Weaknesses

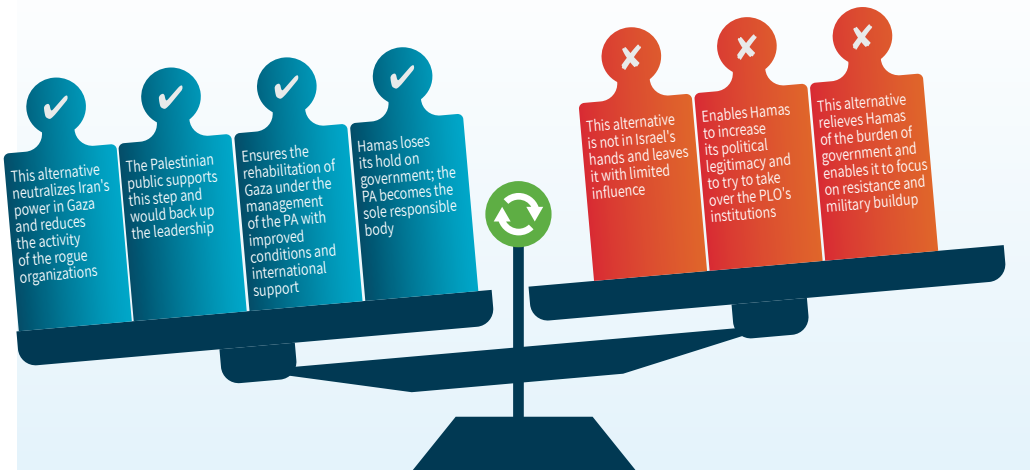
1. Implementing this alternative is not in Israel's hands, and in addition, it contradicts Israel's policy of differentiation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.
2. Hamas—relieved of the burden of taking care of Gaza's population—would be able to restore its standing, which has eroded due to its inability to provide for the needs of Gaza's population. As a result, it would regain legitimacy; this would, of course, have a considerable impact on its ability to become a worthy political alternative to Fatah. From Israel's perspective, this is a weak point, especially if Hamas bolsters its leadership status in the Palestinian

system without accepting the Quartet's conditions, according to which it must refrain from terrorism and violence and recognize existing agreements between Israel and the PLO.

3. The reconciliation plan does not address the need to prevent Hamas's military buildup and its hold on the monopoly of force in Gaza.
4. Hamas conditions intra-Palestinian reconciliation upon its integration within the PLO and its recognition as a legitimate political actor. Thus, there is a concern that it could exploit reconciliation to take over the organization's institutions.

Israel's influence on promoting reconciliation is limited, but it would have considerable influence on its implementation—if it is eventually implemented. Currently, however, Israel is not at all interested in intra-Palestinian reconciliation, and it maintains a policy of differentiation.

Figure 9. Balance of strength and weaknesses of creating conditions for intra-Palestinian reconciliation



In summary, Hamas has already expressed willingness to transfer civil management of Gaza to the PA, but the two sides cannot manage to agree on a formula. In the current state of relations between Hamas and the PA, mainly with Fatah being the primary actor and with Mahmoud Abbas as the president of the PA, the feasibility of this alternative is low. Beyond the ideological gap between the two organizations, as long as Fatah has the upper hand, the organization does not have any reason to compromise and allow Hamas to gain strength.

Unilateral Disconnection of Gaza from Israel



Outline

This alternative involves completely disconnecting the Gaza Strip from Israel—continuing the process of the 2005 disengagement, according to the logic of separation—in order to reach a situation in which Gaza manages itself independently. Implementation of this alternative requires building infrastructure for subsistence in Gaza in the fields of energy, water, production of goods and commerce, as well as infrastructure that would enable exports and imports. This means that free passage of goods and people from Gaza to the Mediterranean and to Egypt via land border crossings would need to be ensured. In this way, Gaza would become autonomous under Hamas rule, which would receive de facto recognition of being a sovereign entity that is separate and different from the PA.



Strengths

1. This would maintain the differentiation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and between the PA and Hamas, and it would support the claim that there is no Palestinian partner for a comprehensive diplomatic agreement.
2. Israel would be relieved of the responsibility for the situation in Gaza, creating a basis for Israel to demand international recognition of its border with Gaza (acceding to this demand would be conditional upon removing the maritime closure of Gaza).
3. Hamas would have to focus on governance and taking care of the population of Gaza. This could intensify the rift within the organization's ranks that could weaken it: The extremists would claim that strengthening the civilian wing damages the logic of resistance and completely changes the character of the movement.

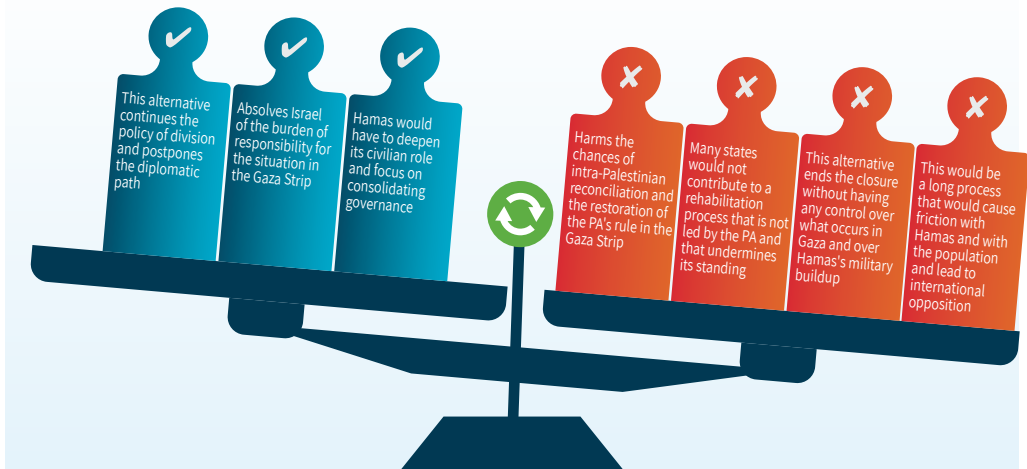


Weaknesses

1. Disconnection could only be implemented gradually, in a lengthy process that would likely be characterized by considerable friction due to broad opposition from the Palestinian side.
2. Even if Gaza develops the ability to be independent, the sides would have to coordinate their activity at the border crossings in order to address shared regional challenges, such as environmental problems. The proximity of the Gazan entity to Israel and its influence on issues of environment, health, management of natural resources, and so forth would, in effect, prevent total disconnection.

3. Disconnecting Israel from Gaza could not be implemented without Egypt's cooperation, as it would have to commit to permanently opening the crossings into Gaza and enabling the passage of goods and people. Egypt would not agree to being Gaza's only outlet to the world, as then it would be considered responsible for what occurs in Gaza. Consequently, Israel would have to provide Gaza with an outlet to the Mediterranean Sea and perhaps access to airspace; thus, it would also have to allow the construction of a seaport and airport in Gaza. This is a weak point of this alternative, as border crossings without Israeli supervision would weaken Israel's ability to monitor and prevent the entry of weapons and dangerous elements into Gaza.
4. Egypt would likely oppose this alternative as it would strengthen the position of the Hamas government—which is identified with the Muslim Brotherhood—and would harm the standing of the PA and the chances of returning Gaza to its control. Thus, Egypt would only cooperate if it believed that disconnection was the only option for bringing about long-term calm and stability in the Gaza Strip and only if Egypt reached the conclusion that this alternative would provide it with advantages such as improving its foreign trade. In any case, Egypt would likely oppose maintaining the differentiation of the two Palestinian subsystems.
5. The PA would oppose disconnecting Gaza from Israel and would probably try to thwart its implementation and success. Disconnecting Gaza from Israel interferes with the PA's ambition to rule Gaza again and to unite it with the West Bank, harms the PA's international standing as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, and perhaps even undermines the current international recognition that the West Bank and Gaza Strip are a single territorial unit.
6. Disconnecting Gaza from Israel could possibly encourage unification between Hamas and Fatah; more likely it would lead to strengthening Hamas's standing and giving it the upper hand, thus creating poor conditions for achieving an agreement between the factions.
7. Implementing this alternative would require recruiting resources and developing infrastructure over time. The issue of raising funds is a barrier that would be difficult to overcome, as the United States, the Gulf States (except for Qatar), and the European states (including the European Union) all define Hamas as a terrorist organization. These bodies also would not financially support an agreement that weakens the PA.
8. Iran could exploit Israel's extended disengagement from Gaza to strengthen its influence via military and economic aid.

Figure 10. Balance of strengths and weaknesses of the unilateral disconnection of Gaza from Israel alternative



In summary, under the current conditions, the alternative of Israel's unilaterally disconnecting from the Gaza Strip has a very low feasibility. In any case, it would be impossible to implement all at once and rather would be a lengthy, difficult process, requiring international funding in order to massively invest in infrastructure, such as constructing a seaport. Furthermore, there is considerable risk that by advancing this alternative, the arena's security as well as Gaza's economic and humanitarian situation would deteriorate. In addition, this alternative would likely encounter severe opposition from various parties, including the PA and regional players—first and foremost Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf States.

The Israeli public would also likely disapprove of a second disengagement process, given the prevailing view that the first disengagement, which took place in 2005, left the territory in the hands of terrorists. The Israeli public would consider a second disengagement as de facto recognition of a hostile independent entity bordering Israel.

Unilateral disconnection would be impossible to implement all at once and rather would be a lengthy, difficult process, requiring international funding in order to massively invest in developing infrastructure, such as the construction of a seaport.

Large-Scale Operation to Defeat Hamas's Military Wing



Outline

Conducting a large-scale military operation in the Gaza Strip would cause Hamas to lose most of its military capabilities, including the ability to attack the Israeli home front. However, there is only a medium probability that Israel could leverage its military success in order to achieve fundamental change in Gaza. Hamas would continue its civil rule even after being struck, deterred, and dwarfed, as it would still have the ability to maintain law and order, or it would be willing to return Gaza to the control of the PA.



Strengths

1. Severe damage of Hamas's military wing and other terrorist organizations (especially the PIJ) would be achieved. This damage would include the destruction of infrastructure for weapons production within Gaza and striking both the rank and file and the top brass of Hamas and the other hostile organizations.
2. Depending on the success of the campaign, it could have a substantial chance of fundamentally changing the situation in Gaza by imposing an arrangement on Hamas in accordance with Israel's demands or by creating conditions for the PA's return to rule Gaza via international support and aid.
3. The IDF would prefer to defeat Hamas and then immediately withdraw from the territory, as a prolonged presence could drag the IDF into reconquering Gaza. Following the operation, and as needed, the IDF would conduct raids into Gaza in order to thwart terrorism and prevent Hamas from renewing its military arsenal and building military infrastructure.
4. Dealing Hamas a strong blow does not contradict Egypt's interest in weakening Hamas and restoring the PA's control over Gaza. Israel could demand that Egypt engage in more effective efforts in order to prevent weapons production and the smuggling of weapons from Sinai into Gaza, so that the operation's achievements would be maintained over time.

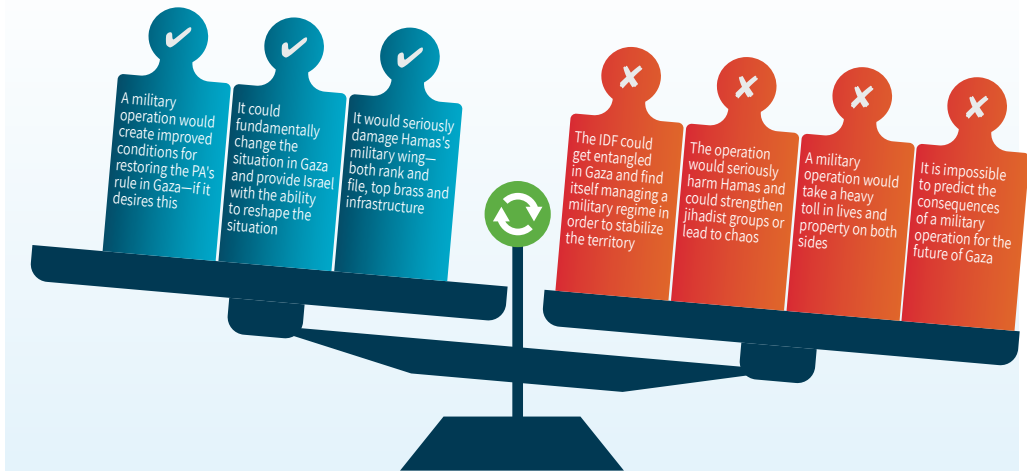


Weaknesses

1. The main disadvantage of this alternative is the inability to predict its consequences for the future of Gaza. An overly powerful attack could entangle Israel in Gaza over time should Hamas be unable to restore order, compelling Israel to leave forces within Gaza in order to stabilize and manage it. An insufficient attack would not produce the desired results and would leave Israel in a position of managing the conflict, while Gaza's destruction and its humanitarian situation would only deteriorate.
2. If Hamas were to collapse following the operation and no other body were found to take on the reins of government in Gaza, this would create a vacuum that would allow jihadist elements to take over the territory. In order to prevent chaos, Israel would have to stay in Gaza and take on its civil management.
3. The optimal possibility is restoring PA rule in Gaza, but there is reasonable concern that the PA itself would be reluctant to take on managing Gaza, lest it be seen as exploiting Gaza's tragedy to strengthen its rule. The PA also would be reluctant because of the heavy costs that would be required to rehabilitate the Gaza Strip after the destruction caused during Israel's military operation.
4. A military operation would take a heavy toll on life and property both in Gaza and in Israel. In addition, Israel would risk a lengthy war of attrition if it were forced to remain in the Gaza Strip over time and Israel would severely jeopardize its international standing due to the images of destruction that would flow out of the Gaza Strip.
5. Hamas, which is a movement with a broad social-religious basis, would likely reappear immediately after the IDF's withdrawal.
6. This alternative is based on the assumption that a dichotomous separation between Hamas's military and political wings is possible, and that in the case of a military defeat, the political wing would continue to function. This is an unproven working assumption, and it should be seen as a significant weakness.

The main problem with this alternative is that without the possibility of inserting a ruling body in place of Hamas—the PA or an international body—even if significant deterrence is achieved with the completion of the operation, it would not be maintained over time.

Figure 11. Balances of the strengths and weaknesses of a large-scale operation to defeat Hamas's military wing

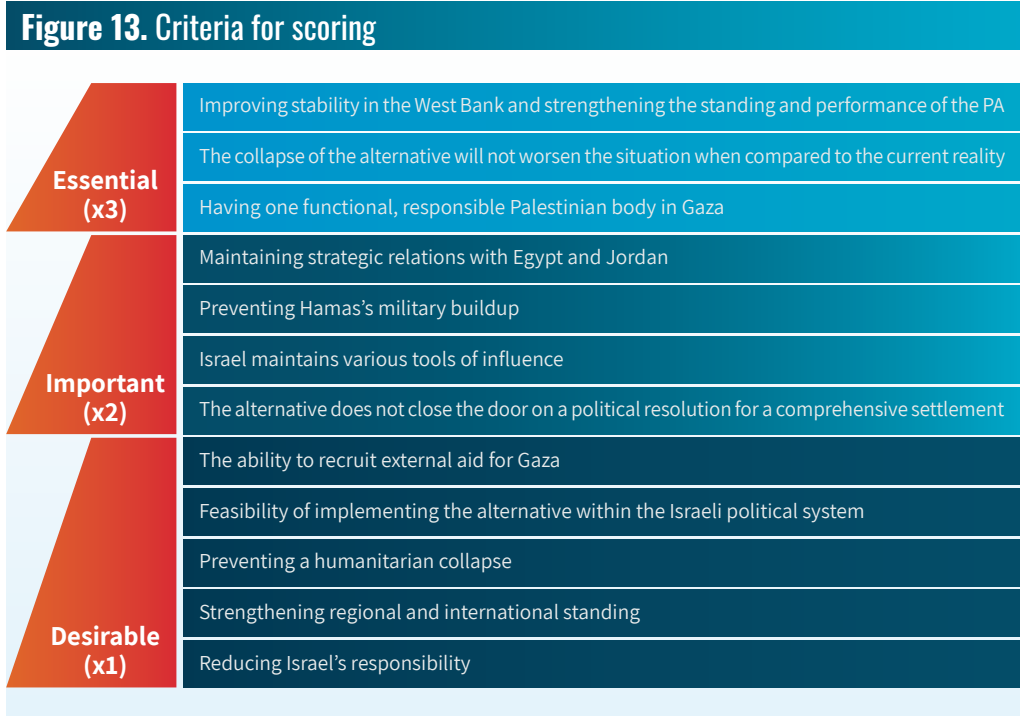
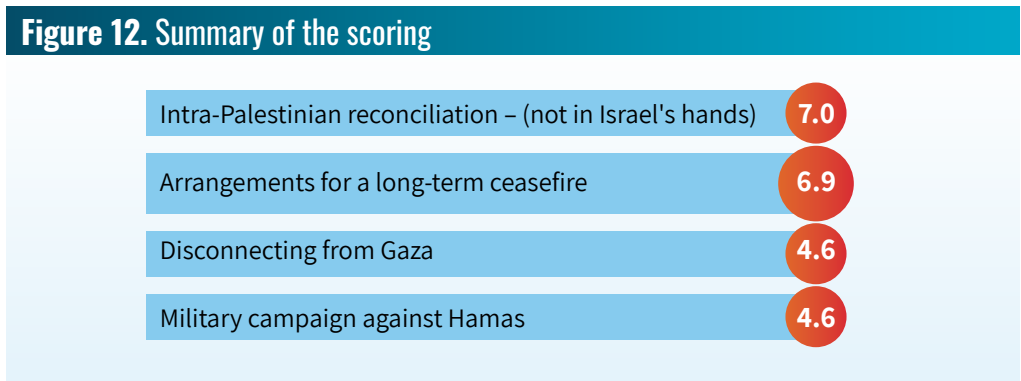


In summary, the inability to ensure the desired end-state—a militarily defeated Hamas that continues in the civil management of Gaza—is a significant weakness. Whether the IDF succeeds to critically damage Hamas or not, the organization's continued ability to rule in practice and to manage Gaza with all of its challenges is not guaranteed. The assumption that it is possible to separate between civil rule and military rule in Gaza would pose a real challenge for the IDF in meeting the operation's objectives. The main concern that arises from this alternative is that Israel would be dragged into maintaining a longer-term presence in Gaza, whether because the operation's objectives were not completed and hidden cells still need to be located and eradicated, or because Hamas's rule collapses, leaving Gaza without a governing body to assume responsibility for civil management. This might lead to chaos and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis, and Israel would have to help provide for the basic needs in Gaza. To deal with this situation, Israel would need to institute a military regime and prolong its presence in Gaza, thus increasing the number of casualties and costs, as well as international criticism of Israel, and perhaps even sanctions.

Grading the Alternatives—Expert Assessment

Based on the criteria for comparing the alternatives, a number of experts were asked to provide a score between 1 and 5 on how well the alternative addresses each criterion. Different weight was given to each criterion: essential (x3); important (x2); desirable (x1).

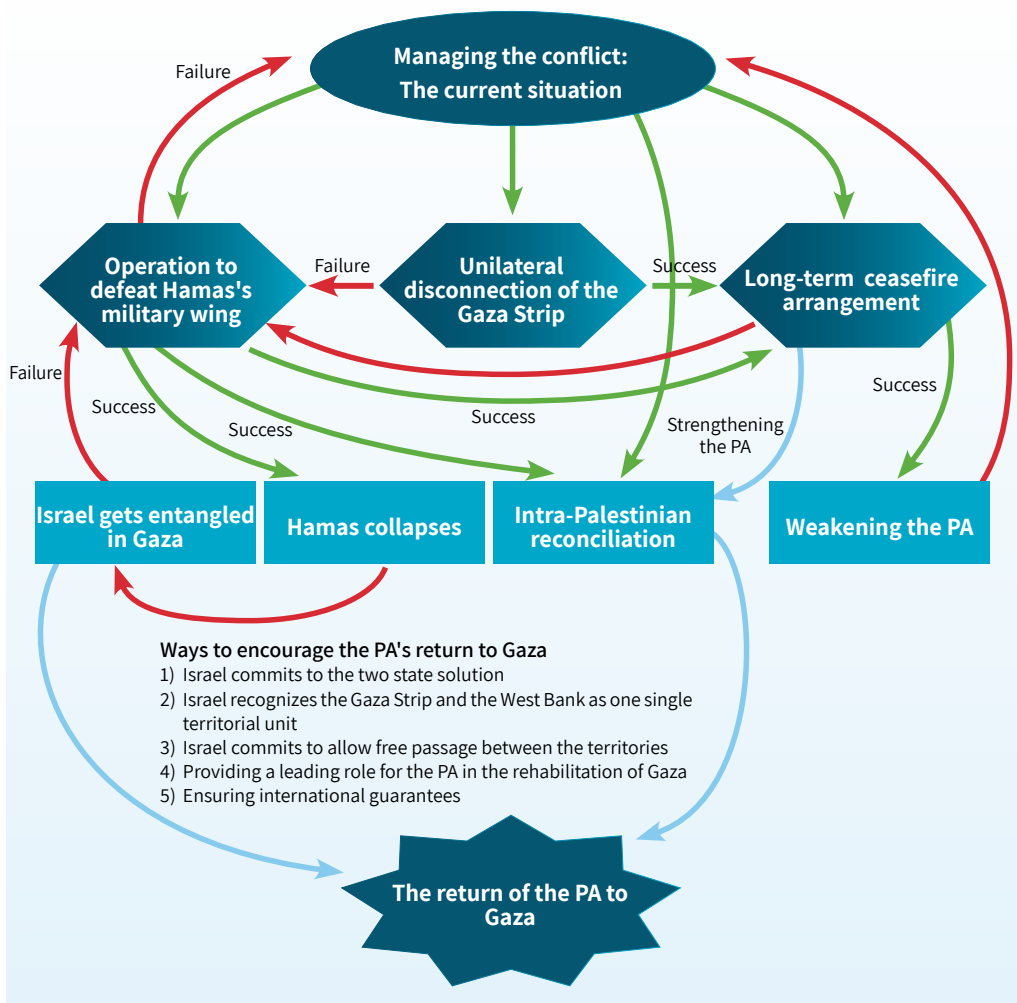
Figure 12 below is a summary of the weighted scoring of each alternative, made up of the scores that the researchers gave for each criteria and calculated according to their weight:



Connectivity between the Alternatives

In the diagram below, the connectivity between the alternatives creates a circular dynamic: Implementing an alternative in the short term leads to a different alternative in the medium term and even a return to managing the conflict in the long term. **It is evident that none of the alternatives is stable over time. Breaking out of this circularity is only possible in a situation in which the PA returns to ruling and managing the Gaza Strip**, thus creating a single functioning leadership for the two Palestinian territories—this is the preferred way to restore security to the Israeli communities near Gaza and to maintain Israel’s regional interests.

Figure 14. Connectivity between the alternatives and avenues of success and failure



Consequently, in addition to improving the security situation and advancing stability over time in the Gaza Strip, in the arrangement alternative Israel must promote the conditions for returning control of Gaza to the PA and ensuring its central role in reconstructing Gaza.

According to the diagram above, disconnection appears to be the least stable of the alternatives, as it inevitably leads to implementing another alternative. Its success would lead to an arrangement vis-à-vis an autonomous Gaza, while its failure would lead to escalation and a military operation to eradicate terrorism. This understanding and the practical difficulties of implementing this alternative make it clear that this is an undesirable alternative. The alternatives of an arrangement and of a military operation are more dominant, as they both have the potential to substantively change the security situation. However, while an arrangement could reduce the chances of intra-Palestinian reconciliation,

a military operation would create the necessary—albeit insufficient—conditions that could lead to the return of the PA to managing Gaza. **A military operation could also lead to an arrangement, but this would not necessarily be better for Israel than an arrangement without a military operation.** Furthermore, Gaza’s destruction and its humanitarian crisis would become more severe and more difficult to rehabilitate following a military operation. The inability to control the final results and the heavy toll of a military operation—in terms of human lives, costs, and Israel’s international standing—increase the risks inherent in this alternative.

In order to reap the benefits of the arrangement alternative, Israel must help the PA avoid negative consequences. To this end, Israel must strengthen the PA and its standing in the West Bank and, at the same time, not sabotage intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts. Israel—in coordination with the international community—can strengthen the PA by providing it with a leading role in reconstructing Gaza, while the PA government could handle the reconstruction budgets. Consequently, in addition to improving the security situation and advancing stability over time in the Gaza Strip, with the arrangement alternative, Israel must promote the conditions for returning control of Gaza to the PA and ensuring its central role in reconstructing Gaza.

PART 4: ADDITIONAL FACTORS

Egypt's Stance

The security coordination between Israel and Egypt is a central component of Israel's defense policy in the Gaza Strip and along the border with the Sinai Peninsula. This coordination is necessary for implementing any of the alternatives, as Egypt is a central mediator between Israel and Hamas, serves as a channel for reducing pressure from Gaza, and is Gaza's gateway to the world. Cooperation with Egypt is essential for advancing humanitarian projects, enabling the passage of workers and students from Gaza to other countries, and enlisting the Arab world to aid in improving the situation in Gaza. Egypt's strategy toward Hamas in the Gaza Strip is based on accommodation in the short-to-medium term and the desire to gradually weaken the organization on all levels—militarily, politically, and ideologically. Egypt is not interested in having an organization identified with the Muslim Brotherhood that rules along its border; thus, Egypt aspires to return the Gaza Strip to the control of the PA. In addition, Egypt seeks the existence of a single legitimate and functioning PA because of considerations that relate to the prospects of negotiations. However, Egypt is obliged to recognize Hamas's de facto control of the Gaza Strip and to recognize it as a fact due to the lack of motivation and ability of the PA under Abbas to return to ruling over the territory. Since 2017, Egypt-Hamas relations have improved, particularly when the two sides agreed to cooperate in eradicating the infrastructure of the Islamic State in the Sinai Peninsula and following Hamas's decision to downplay its identification with the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, Egypt seeks maximum stability in the Gaza Strip as it would lead to increased security in the Sinai Peninsula, the restoration of tourism in the region, and the encouragement of foreign investment.

These are Egypt's expected positions and actions regarding the alternatives presented above:

- A. Egypt does not want Hamas to be part of the permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue; thus, it is working to mediate a reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah. Consequently, of all the alternatives examined, the optimal one from Egypt's perspective is advancing intra-Palestinian reconciliation, in which the PA would return to be the sovereign on the ground, thus eroding Hamas's political and ideological influence. After achieving this reconciliation, Egypt would pursue Gaza's rehabilitation and would even help recruit an international aid package, including an inter-Arab aid package.

Figure 15. Egypt's preferences regarding the different alternatives



- B. While the alternative of militarily defeating Hamas would lead to public criticism by Egypt, it would be unlikely to suspend military relations between Egypt and Israel. Although Egypt is committed to the Palestinian issue both publicly and politically, its military and political leadership would welcome the defeat of Hamas's military wing and of the PIJ as a positive strategic development; thus, Egypt would be unlikely to impede Israel from fulfilling its military mission, but it would express serious apprehension at the situation that would develop in Gaza following a military operation. Egypt is especially concerned about creating a governmental vacuum and of the subsequent chaos that could drag it into having additional involvement and responsibility in Gaza.
- C. Egypt would likely reject outright a complete Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip, as this would solidify and even strengthen Hamas's standing in the region. Furthermore, the separation would place additional responsibility on Egypt, which is not interested in ruling the Gaza Strip but rather only in influencing it. One of the byproducts of this alternative could be strengthening Hamas's relations with extremist elements in northern Sinai and with Egypt's adversaries—Qatar, Iran, and Turkey—who would offer aid in order to expand their influence in the region, and Egypt clearly has no interest in this.

- D. The alternative of a long-term ceasefire arrangement would be welcomed in Egypt on the one hand, as it would contribute to the region's long-term calm and stability; however, on the other hand, it would also be met with concern, as it would maintain the division in the Palestinian arena and reduce the chances of creating a single Palestinian state under the control of the PA. Therefore, Cairo would likely utilize the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel to promote intra-Palestinian reconciliation that would enable the reconstruction of Gaza and the return of the PA to managing it.

The Perspective of the Palestinian Public in Gaza

The Gazan population supports any alternative that ends the closure and challenges the status quo. After more than a decade of existential distress, the residents have lost hope that their situation will improve without any substantial change between Gaza and its neighbors. The poor conditions in Gaza have not translated into large-scale ongoing protests against Hamas, which so far has succeeded in quickly suppressing any “bottom-up” organizing and has taken a hard line against those who try to undermine the stability of Gaza from within. The possibility of a regime change in Gaza is very slim, as the Gazan public is exhausted and depressed and would have difficulty producing new leadership. The slogan “Gaza is choking” is heard repeatedly. Therefore, as previously mentioned, the population of Gaza would support any alternative that ends the closure and leads to economic-infrastructure change in the territory.

Public opinion polls conducted in the Palestinian arena show that the opinions of Gazans regarding relations with Israel are more moderate than those of West Bank residents. A poll conducted in June 2019 by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion reveals broad support for maintaining the ceasefire with Israel and even a willingness to work for Israeli companies within Gazan territory or in the West Bank. Of the residents surveyed, 61 percent agreed with the statement that “Hamas should stop calling for Israel’s destruction, and instead accept a permanent two-state solution based on the 1967 borders.” In addition, Gaza’s population is focused on domestic problems and on the need to improve life in Gaza and not on advancing political solutions or pointing the blame at Israel. Of those surveyed, 89 percent agreed with the statement that “internal political and economic reform is more important for us than any foreign policy issue.” These findings strengthen the assessment that the Gazan population is indifferent to the identity of the governing entity—Hamas, the PA, even Israel—as long as their lives improve and there is a glimmer of hope that they will be able to live with dignity and escape from the sense of being imprisoned.

Figure 16. Palestinian opinions regarding domestic issues

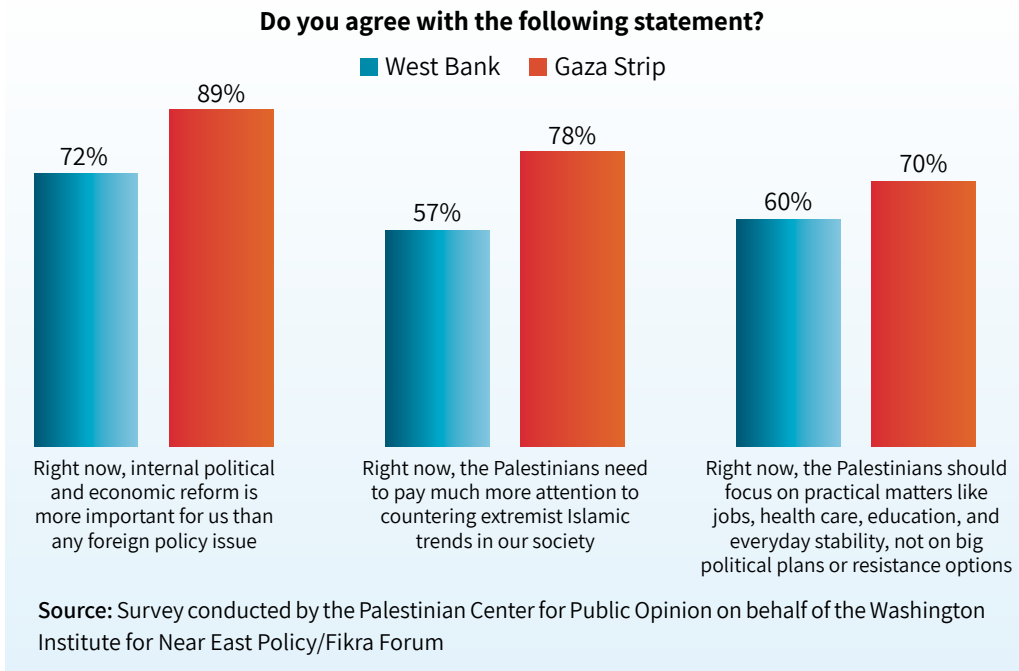
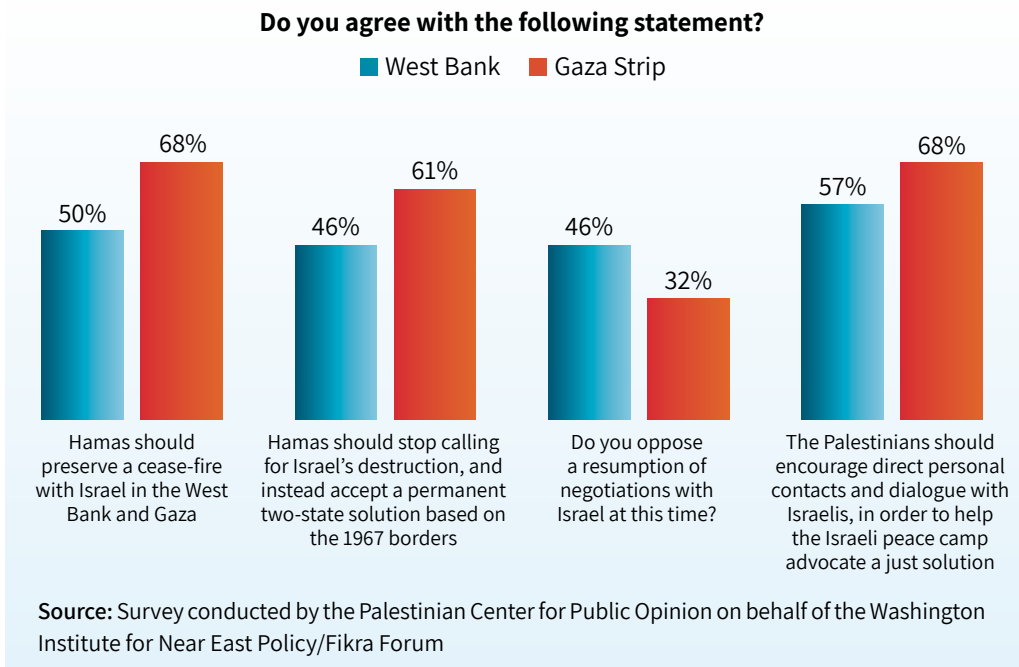


Figure 17. Palestinian opinions regarding the future of the conflict

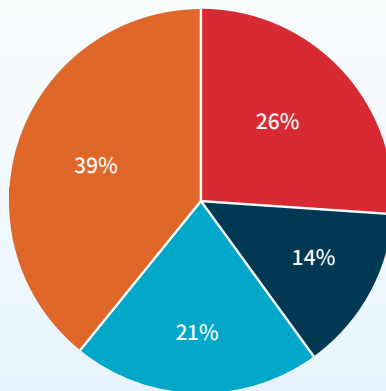


The Position of the Israeli Public

A poll on the position of the Israeli public—as reflected in traditional media and social media— shows that aside from the demand for calm in the south, the public does not demonstrate considerable interest in Gaza. Since Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, and despite learning that the differentiation between Hamas and the PA is problematic, the Israeli public still does not support taking steps that would help promote some kind of agreement with the Palestinians. Public opinion polls (“The National Security Index”) conducted in recent years by INSS on the issue of Gaza show that the majority of the public supports maintaining and consolidating Hamas’s deterrence through large-scale military action; a third of the public supports the dismantling of Gaza’s military capabilities, and a negligible portion supports recognizing Hamas’s rule in Gaza and direct dialogue with it. In 2018, the Israeli public’s support for the possibility of overthrowing Hamas’s rule at the cost of occupying Gaza declined significantly: from 34 percent in 2015 to only 18 percent in 2018. It is evident that, as a rule, the Israeli public’s support echoes the government’s policy, which works to contain the situation, manage the conflict, and refrain—as much as possible—from large-scale escalation.

Figure 18. Israel should attempt to return control of Gaza to the Palestinian Authority

■ Completely support ■ Somewhat support ■ Somewhat oppose ■ Completely oppose

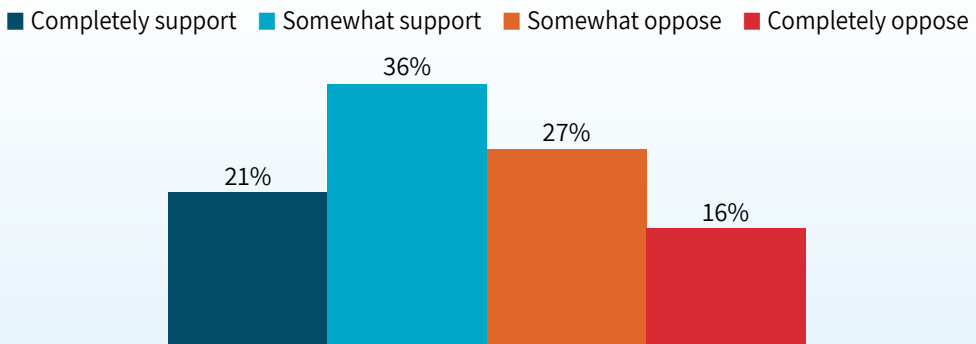


Source: The poll was conducted by Public Opinion Research of Israel (PORI) for INSS

The polls therefore show that the majority of the Israeli public prefers continuing the policy of managing the conflict and that it would support an extended ceasefire until the conditions between the two Palestinian subsystems become clear and transparent or change. If these two preferred options fail, the likelihood of the Israeli public’s

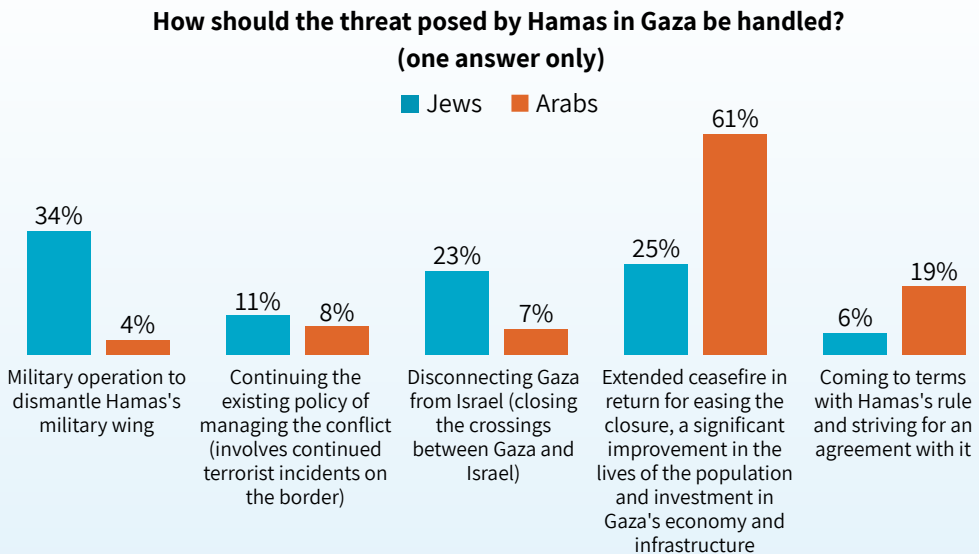
support for defeating Hamas’s military wing is expected to increase. The alternative of cutting off all connections with the Gaza Strip apparently would be considered a second disengagement—after the first one developed a negative image—and would be seen as recognizing Hamas’s rule and giving up on Israel’s ability to control events in Gaza. Therefore, such a decision would likely arouse public controversy. Notably, if the Israeli political and military leadership were to support this alternative and conduct an extensive public relations campaign in favor of it, this could greatly influence the public’s level of support for it.

Figure 19. It is impossible to advance agreements in Judea and Samaria without solving the problem of Gaza



Source: The poll was conducted by PORI for INSS

Figure 20. How the threat posed by Hamas in Gaza should be handled



Source: The poll was conducted by PORI for INSS

PART 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementation of the arrangement alternative would require additional preparations that aim to prevent the weakening of the PA's standing in the Palestinian arena vis-à-vis Hamas. Processes that encourage a significant improvement in the economic situation and the quality of life in the West Bank, along with strengthening the PA's functioning and stability within its territory, would help increase public support.

There is no magic solution for creating positive substantive change in the Gaza Strip; however, this research shows that the best alternative—and with the highest probability—is establishing a long-term ceasefire arrangement between Israel and Hamas through Egyptian mediation. A ceasefire would include significantly easing the closure of Gaza and advancing infrastructure projects.

In order to increase the value of this alternative for Israel, external stabilization and supervision mechanisms would be required, and especially Egypt's commitment to support these mechanisms would be necessary. In addition, the ceasefire would need to include barriers for preventing Hamas's military buildup. Although it is possible to formulate understandings for a ceasefire from a more advantageous position after a large-scale military operation, based on strengthened deterrence, it is doubtful whether this is necessary. Even as this

document was being prepared (December 2019), **understandings in this spirit could be reached through indirect negotiations with Egyptian mediation, without the heavy toll to lives and property that would certainly accompany a military operation.** Comparing the alternatives shows that the conditions for an arrangement following a large-scale military operation would not be considerably better than what is possible to achieve without such an operation: Even after a military operation, no solution would completely prevent Hamas's renewed military buildup, nor return the PA's civil and security rule over the Gaza Strip.

The alternative of a ceasefire arrangement with Hamas would maintain Hamas's current standing—being the only functioning body responsible for Gaza. By emboldening Hamas's leadership role, Hamas would have more tools to keep Salafi-jihadist elements, especially the PIJ, at bay, which are Iranian inspired and currently seek to undermine Hamas's rule or divert it from its civil commitments toward resistance by shooting at Israel and dragging it into military action. In order to carry out the understandings and maintain a state of calm with Israel, Hamas would have to take a hard line against these groups, thus further solidifying its status as sovereign, which it already enjoys today.

The preferred option for Israel is for the PA to rule in the Gaza Strip; but without the necessary conditions, Hamas's rule is the best of the worst from Israel's perspective, since it also strengthens the coordination between Israel and Egypt. As for Jordan, Israel must convince it that an arrangement with Hamas will not undermine the PA's leading role in the Palestinian system, and that these understandings aim, first and foremost, to bring about calm and stability in the region—which correspond to Jordan's interests. The regime in Egypt of President el-Sisi, who has a pragmatic policy toward the Gaza Strip, would likely continue to support this alternative as long as it is seen as a temporary solution that does not preclude the return of the PA to the Gaza Strip and on a future diplomatic solution. On the practical level, it is possible to realize the ceasefire both within the Israeli political system and that of Hamas.

Reconciliation between the Fatah/PA camp and the Hamas camp could be a main lever for returning Gaza to the PA's rule. This strategy is preferable to the strategy of differentiation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which is currently a central component of the Israeli policy.

Israel must ensure that Hamas's achievements, as perceived and demonstrated within Gaza, should be matched with no less, and perhaps even more, impressive achievements that the PA can provide for the residents of the West Bank. An extremely significant achievement that the PA could utilize to consolidate its standing would be restarting negotiations for a political arrangement, in which Israel would refrain from taking any steps to annex territories in the West Bank. Pursuing such steps depend entirely on Israel.

Optimal implementation of a ceasefire arrangement requires a dual policy aimed at both Gaza and the West Bank. Alongside an arrangement with Hamas, it would be necessary to strive toward an arrangement with the PA in the West Bank. Implementing the outline for separation from the Palestinians in the West Bank, as proposed in INSS's "Strategic Framework for the Israeli-Palestinian Arena," would significantly improve the economic situation and the quality of life in the West Bank.⁵ In addition, in order to recruit international support and financial aid for infrastructure projects in Gaza, the PA must be included, as it is considered the sole legitimate Palestinian government by the international community. Consequently, it is essential to enlist the PA's support for achieving tranquility in Gaza by granting it a unique status in the rebuilding process—which would erode the victorious image that Hamas would try to create for itself. An

5 Amos Yadlin, Udi Dekel, and Kim Lavi, "A Strategic Framework for the Israeli-Palestinian Arena" (Tel Aviv: INSS, March 2019), https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/MitveENG_e.pdf.

arrangement between Israel and Hamas without the PA (as is the case today) would give Hamas more power to dictate the character of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

None of the alternatives examined, except for the military operation option, include an effective way to prevent Hamas's military buildup, and they do not ensure the possibility of demilitarizing Gaza in the longer term or dismantling military capabilities and terrorist infrastructure.

Israel needs to create mechanisms that bypass Hamas vis-à-vis the private civilian sector in Gaza and to promote the PA's involvement as much as possible. Only when the PA returns to power in Gaza and regains an undisputed leadership status, it will be able to participate in negotiations for a comprehensive agreement.

