

“The Day After” Hamas’s Rule in Gaza: Time to Sober Up From the Illusions

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There are more holes than substance in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s document detailing his plan for “the day after” Hamas’s rule in the Gaza Strip. Even if Israel achieves its stated goals of the war—the release of the hostages, toppling Hamas’s regime, and dismantling its armed wing—no magic solution will bring stability and rebuilding to Gaza. Unlike the Israeli prime minister’s vision, a renewed Palestinian Authority returning to power in Gaza is the default option for Israel, especially in terms of the United States and the Arab states, namely Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which will play a key role in the future of Gaza. The advantages of this alternative of a renewed Palestinian Authority is that it can be quickly implemented, it will have the support and backing of the international community, and, most importantly, it will integrate with the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia as well as with the formation of a new regional architecture to counter Iran’s axis of resistance. In the interim period, Israel should act immediately, in coordination with the United States, Egypt, and the Gulf states, to establish a technocratic administration and an apparatus for public order in Gaza—which would be connected to the Palestinian Authority—to bring stability to the area as quickly as possible. During this interim period, the renewed Palestinian Authority would have to prove that it is capable of assuming responsibility for the future of the Gaza Strip.

The goals of Israel’s war against Hamas are obtaining the safe release of the hostages, ensuring that Hamas does not continue to control the Gaza Strip, disarming the terror organization’s military wing, and guaranteeing that Gaza no longer poses a security threat to Israel for an extended period of time.

Therefore, the end-state that the Israeli government needs now to pursue should reflect its desired outcome of the conflict: The hostages have been released; Hamas has been denied its military and governmental capabilities, and it does not have any potential to rebuild; a “renewed” and moderate regime has been established to control the Gaza Strip; Israel has full freedom of military operation to ensure that Gaza remains demilitarized, to launch counterterrorism operations,

and to prevent security threats; all means of obtaining military equipment, including the smuggling routes from the Egyptian border into Gaza, have been blocked and the Gaza Strip has become entirely demilitarized; international and regional forces play a positive role in the affairs of the Gaza Strip; Gaza's infrastructure is being rebuilt; support is given to civilian apparatuses, including those responsible for public order, as well as to a technocratic administration that manages Gaza; Israel's international legitimacy is restored, and it no longer faces challenges in international forums.

As far as the broader Palestinian arena is concerned, Israel must also address the end-state in Judea and Samaria: The renewed Palestinian Authority (PA) is no longer hostile and becomes a focal point for security and governmental stability; the PA advances reforms to improve governance and stamp out incitement and radicalization against Israel; the Palestinian security apparatuses are strengthened; law enforcement and order in the Palestinian territories are improved; the PA works to dismantle terrorist infrastructure, while security coordination with Israel is improved; the Palestinians' quality of life improves: unemployment is reduced, and there are more local employers; the international community and the Gulf states invest in developing the economy and infrastructure of the Palestinian territories; there is security stability and the IDF maintains freedom of operation for counterterrorism operations and dismantling terrorist infrastructure.

On February 23, 2024, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu published his plan for the day after Hamas's rule in Gaza, after having prevented the security cabinet or the government of Israel from discussing the matter for many months. This document of principles outlines his vision in general terms, most of them impossible to implement. The plan states that "Israel will maintain freedom of operation in the entire Gaza Strip, with no time limitation, in order to prevent the reemergence of terrorism and prevent any threats from Gaza." Netanyahu also asserted that, "The security zone established in the Gaza Strip, in the perimeter of Israel's border, will exist as long as there is a security need for it." As for the southern Gaza Strip, Netanyahu wrote that, "Israel needs a 'southern closure' on the Gaza-Egypt border to prevent the strengthening again of terrorists in the Gaza Strip. The 'southern closure' will operate, as much as possible, in cooperation with Egypt and with the assistance of the United States and will include measures to prevent smuggling from Egypt both underground and above ground, including at the Rafah crossing." As for civilian matters, the prime minister stated that local officials with administrative experience, who are not identified with countries or organizations that support terror, will be responsible for the civil administration and for public order in the Gaza Strip.

At the conclusion of the document, Netanyahu reiterated his objections to the unilateral establishment of a Palestinian state: "Israel outright rejects international diktats regarding a permanent status agreement with the Palestinians. Such an arrangement will be reached only through direct negotiations between the parties, without preconditions. Israel will continue to oppose the unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state. Such recognition in the wake of the October 7 massacre would give a huge, unprecedented reward to terrorism and prevent any future peace settlement."

Netanyahu's plan shows that he still adheres to the same basic policy before October 7 and the war—separating and differentiating between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This separation and differentiation between the two territories was designed to show to the Palestinians that living conditions under the PA, which pursued a diplomatic solution to the conflict based on negotiations, were infinitely better than those of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip, under the rule of Hamas, which aspired to destroy Israel. However, during Netanyahu's time as prime minister, this policy of differentiation was reversed, benefiting Hamas in Gaza while weakening the PA to the point that it became irrelevant. This reversal was intended to prevent any possibility of diplomatic negotiations for a solution to the conflict and to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state. Netanyahu, therefore, has remained adamant about weakening the PA, to ensure that it is not involved in the future of the Gaza Strip and to turn it into an irrelevant entity.

In order to distance the PA from Gaza, Netanyahu reportedly seeks to establish a civilian Palestinian apparatus with people who are unaffiliated with existing Palestinian organizations. Israel has found it difficult to identify such people. Additionally, due to the repeated delays in discussing "the day after" the war, Israel missed the opportunity to involve these individuals since capturing parts of Gaza and before descending into chaos, which has left two million people crammed into a small area of southern Gaza, lacking food, healthcare, sewage infrastructure, and public order. Given this situation, Israel might be compelled to set up a Israeli civil administration, which would cost Israeli taxpayers billions, as it is unlikely that other countries would contribute to the costs of reinstating the Israeli occupation of Gaza.

The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) has examined a wide range of possible options for the day after Hamas's rule in the Gaza Strip. Using a platform of "expert wisdom" to find the option that best serves Israel's interests, based on uniform criteria, INSS has determined the following alternative/options:

(1) The complete disengagement of the Gaza Strip from Israel and blocking all border crossings between the two territories; (2) The occupation of Gaza and the long-term deployment of Israeli troops there, along with the establishment of a civil administration or the implementation of Martial Law; (3) Allowing a renewed PA to resume control of Gaza, which is the option preferred by the United States, the Arab states, and the international community; (4) Turning Gaza into a province in a federation with the PA, strengthening the local authorities in Gaza, establishing a technocratic administration to run the Gaza Strip, under the auspices of the PA and obligating it to prior agreements; (5) A Palestinian unity government including or supported by Fatah and Hamas; (6) The Gaza Strip becomes a separate territorial entity, not connected to the PA or the West Bank.

We asked each of the experts to rank the alternatives against the following criteria: the degree to which each alternative aligns with Israel's war objectives; the effectiveness of each alternative in reducing Gaza's reliance on Israel; their potential to foster a central government address that has a monopoly on power; the extent to which they provide security and a sense of safety for residents of the western Negev; the preservation of the IDF's freedom of operation against terrorist threats; their capacity to avert humanitarian crises and chaos; their dependency on established, efficacious mechanisms; the likelihood of positive engagement from the Arab states and international entities in Gaza; their ability to generate resources and funding for Gaza's reconstruction; the level of support from the Israeli public; and the level of support from the Palestinian population in Gaza. Finally, the experts were asked to assess which alternative has the best chance of being successfully implemented.

The two alternatives that received the most support, considerably more than the others, were as follows: (in order of preference):

1. **A "renewed" PA restoring its control over the Gaza Strip:** This approach aligns with the efforts toward normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the establishment of a new regional architecture. It enjoys the support of the United States, the Arab states, and the international community. This strategy would utilize existing mechanisms, channels, and agreements to establish public order in Gaza, with the help of Egypt and with American security coordinator USSC, which would enable these bodies to become quickly operational. Israel could continue its operational doctrine of a long-term confrontation against terrorist groups in coordination with the PA security forces, similar to its operations in Areas A and B of the West Bank. The PA would gain the support of the Palestinian public by returning to Gaza with a significant aid package and assistance

for residents. However, the weaknesses of this alternative include the risk of Hamas rebuilding its strength, the requirement of Israel to make substantial political concessions, including in the West Bank, and the potential that the PA would collapse under such heavy burdens between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

2. **The Gaza Strip as a province of the PA:** This alternative proposes establishing a technocratic administration of Gaza, relying on local leaders and experts who are not members of Hamas, without negating existing agreements between Israel and the PA and continuing coordination with the PA's Civil Affairs Committee. This option is viable for an interim period, pending necessary reforms within the PA. Egypt and the United States would supervise the technocrats, assuming that Hamas does not exert any influence. This alternative could gain support from the people in Gaza who will be involved in the management and rebuilding of Gaza. The quick restoration of public order and the establishment of a civilian force could facilitate the PA's effective resumption of control of the area. The advantage of this approach is that offers a transitional step toward either restoring PA control over the Gaza Strip (Alternative 1, above) or Gaza's territorial independence from the West Bank. The disadvantage of this alternative is that it depends on the acceptance of the United States, the Arab states, and the international community and their assistance in implementing it, as well as Egypt's active involvement. The main challenges are the potential for Hamas to regain its strength and the necessity for Israel to make concessions to the PA to allow its application and will not prevent its success.

In contrast, Prime Minister Netanyahu's proposed alternative—**to make the Gaza Strip a separate territorial entity from the West Bank and not under the control of the Palestinian Authority**—can be described using Netanyahu's own words as being "neither Hamastan nor Fatahstan." This alternative is a continuation of Israel's policy of separation and differentiation between the West Bank and Gaza. The aim is to foster the emergence of a local leadership in Gaza, independent of existing agreements, and reliant on Egyptian support and international contributions to reconstruction. However, the applicability of this alternative is low, the Arab states and the international community would refrain from helping in the rebuilding process; it would make it easier for Hamas to regroup and reemerge; the Strip would become a hotbed for other radical Islamist movements; and this alternative would undermine the relevance of the PA and its continued functioning in the West Bank.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The idea that it is possible to stabilize and reshape the Gaza Strip without the PA, while still garnering support from the Arab states and the international community is an illusion. The significance of Netanyahu's vision is that Israel would assume responsibility for the future of Gaza, which is currently a disaster-stricken area, as no countries have stepped forward to take on the civilian control there, while Israel remains responsible for security matters. This contrasts with the PA alternative, which aligns with the positions of the United States, the Arab states, and the international community. These parties agree that the PA needs reform to effectively manage Gaza. Even Hamas recognizes that it must cede civilian control of Gaza to the PA, even if not forever, since it is unable to secure the necessary aid and support from the international community and Arab countries for rebuilding the Gaza Strip.

Instead of opposing a reformed PA that could return to Gaza, Israel should set preconditions for a "renewed PA." The main condition should be the recognition of the State of Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people. This will lead Israel to see the PA as a partner for political process if it no longer seeks to undermine Israel's legitimacy as the homeland of the Jewish people. Moreover, Israel should insist that Hamas will not play any role in the new Palestinian leadership, explicitly excluding any Hamas representative from ministerial or government positions. The PA should reaffirm its commitment to fighting terrorism, cease the transfer of financial support to families of terrorists and imprisoned Palestinians, and eliminate educational content that radicalizes or incites violence against Israel. These stipulations will test the international community's seriousness in monitoring and making sure that the PA reforms are indeed being implemented.

Even if Israel does achieve its war objectives—the release of the hostages and dismantling Hamas's regime, there will be no "out of nowhere"—a magic alternative to stabilizing and shaping the Gaza Strip. The return of a renewed PA to Gaza is a default for Israel, as was also illustrated by the assessments of experts who were asked to prioritize various alternatives for the future of the Gaza Strip. This alternative is preferred mainly by the United States and the Arab states—Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. These states are crucial to stabilizing and rebuilding Gaza. The advantages of this option are that it can be quickly implemented; it would have broad international support; and, most importantly, it would align with the process of normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel, as part of the new regional architecture to counter Iran's axis of resistance.

In the interim period, Israel should act immediately—in coordination with the United States, Egypt, and the Gulf states—to establish a technocratic administration and apparatus for public order in Gaza, which would be connected to the PA. This approach aims to quickly bring stability to the area as an interim measure while the renewed PA proves its readiness to manage Gaza’s future. These measures would not interfere with Israel’s ongoing military campaign to dismantle Hamas’s capabilities and can be implemented in parallel with the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia.