

“The Generals’ Plan”— Right Direction, Wrong Implementation

Udi Dekel and Tammy Caner | No. 1900 | October 15, 2024

Israel has utilized its military action in the Gaza Strip and has successfully dismantled the military arm of Hamas. However, it has not achieved the release of the hostages, and it has not destroyed—or at least neutralized—Hamas’s control over Gaza. In response, several generals in the IDF reserves recently proposed a plan for taking control of northern Gaza, evacuating the civilian population, and laying siege to the area (the “Generals’ Plan”). While the plan contributes to the ongoing debate about the future control of Gaza, it overlooks several key challenges that could complicate its implementation and goals. Furthermore, it does not advance the broader objectives of the war. The plan could also seriously harm Israel’s international legitimacy and may, in effect, accelerate a trend toward occupying and holding the Gaza Strip through Israeli military rule. To curb this trend and prevent Israel from bearing full responsibility for the Gaza Strip and its population, the IDF should manage humanitarian aid from a distance and cooperate with the international humanitarian agencies, while also preventing Hamas from restoring its military and governmental-civilian capabilities.

Several generals in the IDF reserves recently proposed a plan to take control of the northern Gaza Strip, evacuate the civilian population, and impose a siege on the area (the “Generals’ Plan”), to help achieve Israel’s objectives in the war against Hamas—bringing home the hostages and destroying Hamas’s military and governing capacities. While Israel’s political and military leadership has responded positively to the plan, they have not fully adopted it.

The Generals’ Plan is based on the following assumptions:

- The strategy of military pressure to secure the release of the hostages has failed and continuing with the current military pressure will not achieve the desired outcome.
- The IDF has not managed to carry out additional operations through which it could achieve the objectives of the war—the destruction of Hamas’s military and governing capacities. These additional operations include encircling the combat zones; fully evacuating the population from areas crucial for continued fighting; imposing a full siege on northern Gaza; and creating a mechanism for distributing the humanitarian aid that would prevent Hamas from continuing

its control of distribution, as well as control and management of the shelters for the displaced.

- There is a gap between the political and the military leadership's assessment of the fighting in Gaza and its achievements and the reality on the ground. In other words, they have underestimated Hamas's ability to restore its military and governing capabilities.

The Main Points of the Plan

- Four resources enable Hamas to maintain its survival: money, manpower, supplies, and motivation. It secures these by controlling the distribution mechanism of humanitarian aid to the residents of Gaza.
- The only way to harm Hamas's ability to recover is by targeting one or more of these four resources by imposing a siege on Hamas in northern Gaza. Depleting these resources will put pressure on Hamas without violating international law.
- The IDF will demand that the residents of northern Gaza (north of the Netzarim Corridor), approximately 300,000 people, evacuate to southern Gaza via two humanitarian passages within one week.
- After the evacuation, the northern Gaza Strip will be declared a closed military zone and a full siege will be imposed, which will include preventing the entry of food, water, and fuel.
- The siege will be lifted only if about 5,000 militants lay down their weapons and surrender.
- It is possible that this pressure will facilitate progress toward a hostage deal.

According to the plan, the evacuation of the population from northern Gaza and the imposition of a siege on the area will bring Hamas closer to surrender. If Hamas's leader, Yahya Sinwar, chooses to continue fighting, this plan could be implemented in other areas, such as Rafah and the refugee camps in central Gaza.

In our view, this plan will not advance the war's objectives, primarily because it overlooks several significant issues and limitations that will hinder its implementation and the achievement of its goals.

Implications of the Plan for Advancing the War's Objectives

1. **Releasing the hostages:** According to the plan, preventing supplies from reaching Hamas (such as food, water, and fuel) led to the hostage deal of late November 2023. This claim is unfounded. Denying supplies may have been one of Hamas's considerations, but it was likely not the main one. A major factor that led Hamas to agree to the release of hostages at the time was the intense criticism it faced from the Arab public and the Arab states in response to the images of the October 7 massacre and the kidnapping of women, children, and the elderly. Additionally, another consideration was the difficulty of continuing to move and hide a large number of hostages. Thus, there is no evidence to support the assumption that a siege of Gaza and its starvation would lead to the release of the hostages. Furthermore, the plan poses a risk to the hostages, as they would likely be the first to be deprived of food and water (some are also hidden in the northern Strip) as supplies dwindle in Gaza.
2. **The collapse of Hamas:** There is no certainty that Hamas militants will surrender due to starvation. Many of them will survive in northern Gaza due to supplies that Hamas has stockpiled, and when those supplies run out, they will likely attempt to infiltrate the humanitarian shelters. Some terrorists could also disguise themselves as civilians during the southward evacuation of the population and escape, joining the terror and guerrilla forces fighting elsewhere in Gaza. Overall, the plan does not adequately address the current situation, in which Hamas continues to rebuild itself by recruiting new militants into its ranks; safeguarding and hiding weapons; causing the "disappearance" of its military arm by assimilating into the civilian population; controlling the distribution of food to the Gazan population in general and the displaced in shelters in particular, and retaking control in the areas from which the IDF withdraws.

Additional Issues and Limitations That Will Hinder the Plan's Implementation

Imposing a siege on enemy forces is legitimate and permissible under international law, provided it is directed against enemy forces and the civilian population can evacuate via safe humanitarian corridors prior to the siege. The Generals' Plan, however, fails to address the reasonable possibility that some civilians will remain in the north under the siege and disregards the ramifications it will have on Israel.

1. **Population remaining in northern Gaza:** Some of the population will likely refuse to evacuate to shelters in southern Gaza, especially as winter approaches, as no better living conditions await them there. With its larger number of buildings, northern Gaza offers more shelters than southern

"The Generals' Plan"— Right Direction, Wrong Implementation

Gaza. It is also likely that Hamas will act to prevent civilians from evacuating and that some evacuees will attempt to return to the north, challenging the IDF with the task of stopping their movement by force. Therefore, even with efforts to evacuate the civilian population to the south, the current situation will likely reoccur.

2. **The legal ramifications of besieged populations:** Allowing the civilians to evacuate indicates that Israel does not intend to starve the population and that the siege is not directed at them. Moreover, the civilians' refusal to evacuate and Hamas's efforts to prevent them from doing so will not render the siege illegal. However, the siege must still comply with the principle of proportionality; any harm caused to civilians must be proportionate, not excessive, compared to the military advantage intended to be achieved. Therefore, the fact that the siege targets Hamas will not absolve Israel of the obligation to allow the entry of humanitarian aid and the prohibition of starving the population. Nonetheless, the Generals' Plan does not address the issue of Hamas potentially seizing aid and supplies entering northern Gaza for the besieged population.
3. **Additional legal measures against Israel:** Even when legal, the use of siege is often criticized due to its potential to harm the civilian population. The Generals' Plan is likely to be considered illegal due to its impact on the civilians remaining in the northern Gaza Strip. This could exacerbate the ongoing legal campaign against Israel in the international arena, strengthening accusations against Israel of preventing humanitarian aid and using starvation as a method of warfare. A siege on northern Gaza is likely to lead to another round of court orders in the genocide proceedings against Israel in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and could increase the likelihood that the ICC would issue arrest warrants against Israel's prime minister and defense minister.
4. **Damage to Israel's international legitimacy:** One year into the war, Israel still enjoys some degree of international support, mainly because Hamas is still holding 101 Israeli hostages and Israel's efforts to improve the flow and distribution of humanitarian aid. However, if Israel imposes a siege on northern Gaza, even if legal, it will face harsh criticism that will reinforce accusations of war crimes. Israel's close allies, especially the United States, would find it increasingly difficult to continue their support. Israel's war efforts rely heavily on international legitimacy, which is crucial for achieving its goals in Gaza and Lebanon. At this stage, given the protracted nature of the war, the dire humanitarian situation, and the widespread devastation

in Gaza, Israel cannot afford to be seen as restricting aid to civilians, thus undermining what remains of its international legitimacy.

Accelerating the Trend Toward Occupying Gaza and Imposing Military Government

The Generals' Plan does not offer political solutions that would help stabilize and shape the Gaza Strip in the long term. It does not create the conditions for the emergence of an alternative leadership to Hamas in Gaza, and, in fact, it aligns with the government's policy of rejecting any proposal to involve the Palestinian Authority in Gaza's administration.

Additionally, the Generals' Plan could potentially lead Israel to occupy the Gaza Strip and establish a military rule there. This would place the responsibility for over two million Palestinians on Israel's shoulders. Such a scenario could worsen the security and political challenges Israel faces and would also put a heavy burden on Israeli society from both moral and economic standpoints.

Moreover, the IDF has a limited number of forces that it can allocate to pursuing the militants who remain in northern Gaza or those who attempt to infiltrate the area. This mission will likely compete with other pressing operations in other arenas, such as Lebanon and Judea and Samaria.

What Should Be Done Instead?

The only viable way to break this deadlock is for Israel to manage humanitarian aid—indirectly, from a distance. In this framework, the IDF would monitor the movement of humanitarian convoys from the air to ensure that neither Hamas nor criminal elements take control of them. This will require closer coordination with international organizations involved in providing aid, including UNWRA. Israel should designate specific humanitarian enclaves for aid distribution, meaning the population would move to these enclaves to collect the necessary aid. These enclaves should be located near active healthcare institutions (such as the Jordanian and UAE field hospitals).

In addition to representatives from international organizations, local Gazan authorities who are not affiliated with Hamas (approximately two-thirds of the employees in the local authorities) should be involved in operating these humanitarian enclaves. This would begin to cultivate a local civilian leadership and would neutralize Hamas's emergency committees, which currently control much of Gaza's civilian activities, especially the provision of shelters and the distribution of humanitarian aid. Occasionally, the IDF would need to physically intervene in these enclaves to prevent Hamas from regaining control and to deprive the organization of one of the sources of survival, as well as its image as the entity that oversees the civilian activities in Gaza.

"The Generals' Plan"— Right Direction, Wrong Implementation

In a discussion held in the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Security Committee at the end of September 2024, Prime Minister Netanyahu addressed the possibility of imposing Israeli military governance in the Gaza Strip: “That is not the goal, as far as I am concerned. It is a means and not a goal. We do not want control on the ground or to hold the area, or to annex it. We will not annex Gaza.” In practice, managing humanitarian aid from a distance could provide an answer to the prime minister’s intentions and the need to advance the broader objectives of the war. This approach would prevent Israel from being burdened with full responsibility for humanitarian aid and, later, for the other civilian aspects in Gaza, such as water and food supply, education, health, infrastructure, and public order.

We strongly emphasize the importance of international organizations to act as intermediaries between Israel and the Palestinian population. These organizations would be responsible for distributing humanitarian aid with the assistance of civilian bodies in Gaza that are not affiliated with Hamas. This approach would reduce Israeli control over the supply of the population’s needs, which would otherwise be considered as imposing military rule.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg