

# **Where Are the Vectors in the Gaza Strip Leading?**

## **Insights from a Simulation**

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The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) conducted a simulation to examine the possible implications of a situation in which Israel, Hamas, the United States, and other actors in the Middle East find themselves at a decision-making crossroads due to a disagreement over the second phase of the hostage release framework.

The simulation illustrated the strategic complexity of the situation in the Gaza Strip, the negotiations surrounding the release of Israeli hostages held by Hamas, and the path toward ending the war. The United States seeks to achieve a ceasefire that would enable a broader arrangement and aims to steer events in a way that advances a regional security architecture and consolidates an Arab front against Iran. Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia aim for regional stability—in coordination with Israel—but are likely to delay their active involvement in stabilizing and reconstructing the Gaza Strip for as long as possible. They will not volunteer to dismantle Hamas or demilitarize the Strip. Iran and Hezbollah, for their part, are expected to continue their war of attrition against Israel. As for Israel, it will have to decide between resuming high-intensity warfare with the objective of conquering Gaza or adopting a phased framework with American backing, under which Hamas will continue to consolidate its strength and exploit the hostage issue to preserve its survival.

### **The Scenario**

Following negotiations under fire and the passage of its state budget, the Israeli government yields to pressure from the United States and peace partner countries and returns to negotiations as part of the second phase of the framework to release the hostages. Israel succeeds in securing the release of 16 out of the remaining 24 living hostages. Hamas continues to hold 12 soldiers—both alive and deceased—and five living hostages as insurance for its continued survival. Hamas also declares that it is unable to locate all the deceased hostages but agrees to return some of them if they are found.

During the course of negotiations, Hamas expresses a willingness to transfer civil control of the Gaza Strip to a local Palestinian administration, but it refuses any demands related to disarmament or the demilitarization of the Strip. For its part, Israel declares its readiness to conduct discussions with Arab states based on the Egyptian plan for stabilizing and rebuilding the Strip, under the following conditions: Hamas will no longer be the governing authority in Gaza, the organization will be disarmed, and an effective mechanism will be established to enforce the Strip's demilitarization.

Negotiations between the parties reach yet another impasse while the United States works feverishly—via envoys in Doha and Cairo—to restart the talks. A compromise proposal begins

to take shape: a framework in which Hamas would issue a statement expressing a willingness to “discuss demilitarization,” and Israel would announce that it is prepared to discuss ending the war. The US Secretary of State declared that if the Egyptian–Arab plan is implemented in a manner that ensures Israel’s demands are met—namely, without Hamas’s governance and with demilitarization—the US administration would support it while keeping the option of “voluntary emigration” of Gaza residents on the table in case the plan is not fully implemented.

Given Hamas’s position—agreeing to transfer civil control to another administration but still refusing to commit to disarmament—Israel now faces a critical decision: Does it view this as sufficient progress to justify continuing negotiations, or does it constitute a red line that cannot be crossed—one that would lead to a decision to resume the IDF’s high-intensity campaign, even at the risk of the lives of the remaining hostages?

### **Insights from the Simulation**

In Israel, there is a strong desire to achieve a decisive victory in the war and to bring about the collapse of Hamas, driven by the humiliation of the events of October 7. The transformation in Israel’s position following October 7 means that more compromising concepts such as “quiet in return for quiet,” containment, and reliance on international enforcement and implementation mechanisms are no longer valid.

At the same time, a dynamic has emerged in which the Gaza Strip is viewed as solely Israel’s problem. None of the regional actors intend to extricate Gaza—or Israel—from the situation created by Hamas’s attack and the ensuing war. The combination of these various factors leads Israel toward the occupation of the Strip, with the risk of becoming mired in the Gazan quagmire.

President Donald Trump supports the collapse of Hamas but believes that Israel must be the one to achieve this objective—he expects Israel to “deliver the goods.” Simultaneously, he seeks an end to the war, the release of the living hostages, and an opportunity for his administration to focus on promoting a regional order.

Saudi Arabia is the Trump administration’s key strategic asset in the region—a source of financing for major deals and perceived as the leader of the Arab world. From Israel’s perspective, drifting away from ending the war—especially a full occupation of the Strip—undermines prospects for normalization with Saudi Arabia. In such a scenario, Riyadh is likely to pursue bilateral ties with the Trump administration without conditioning them on normalization with Israel.

Israel’s military success in other arenas of the war—including damage inflicted on Iran and its proxies—has significantly reduced the sense of threat regarding a regional war. As a result, the motivation among Arab states to take part in ending the war, including a willingness to play a practical and meaningful role in stabilizing and reconstructing the Gaza Strip, has diminished.

To date, no practical mechanism has been presented for disarming Hamas or preventing its renewed military buildup, aside from Israeli military responsibility for achieving these goals.

For Arab states to advance their plan for the recovery, reconstruction, and development of the Strip, they will need to consent to Israel's overriding security responsibility within it. Israel, for its part, will be required to accept the "red lines" of the Arab states regarding the security framework for operations in the Strip.

In this scenario, the standing of the Palestinian Authority (PA) has improved, as there is no alternative to Hamas, and President Mahmoud Abbas has consistently demanded the removal of Hamas from power, its disarmament, and its exclusion from governing Gaza. Moreover, the PA's status has improved in the eyes of Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, with the exception of the United Arab Emirates. Therefore, it is appropriate for Israel to reconsider its outright rejection of the PA as a relevant actor in resolving the issue of Gaza.

### **Analysis of the Positions of the Key Players**

#### **Israel**

The Israeli government, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, views the collapse of Hamas as its central strategic objective. Netanyahu is also driven by domestic political considerations—maintaining the coalition and avoiding a crisis with the Trump administration. Israel will agree to any framework proposed by the Trump administration, but it will condition its acceptance on security mechanisms, such as a snapback mechanism (which enables an automatic return to the previous state in the event of a breach of terms), security control around the perimeter of the Gaza Strip, and operational freedom for security interventions. Without these conditions, Israel is expected to resume a high-intensity operation.

#### **Strategic principles presented by Israel during the simulation:**

- The Israeli government views the elimination or collapse of Hamas rule as a central, non-negotiable objective of the confrontation.
- The hostage issue is regarded more as a constraint than as the overarching goal of the war.
- The ongoing war is not bound by an external timeline, as long as it continues to serve the government's internal political interests. In general, time is not perceived as working against Israel.
- There is no need or place to discuss the "day after" the war, as the government opposes any framework that would include or allow the continued existence of Hamas or Palestinian Authority control in the Strip. Therefore, the stabilization and reconstruction of Gaza is not considered influencing factors in the Israeli government's decision-making as long as the objective of toppling Hamas has not been achieved.
- Israel is fully reliant on the United States and the Trump administration. This policy requires meeting its expectations and avoiding a crisis in bilateral relations.
- Israel preserves the option for a powerful military response in case negotiations fail.

- Simultaneously, Israel will pursue a military option against Iran and maintain the possibility of normalization with Saudi Arabia.

**Key dilemmas in the Israeli government's decision-making process, as highlighted in the simulation:**

- Can Israel continue fighting while taking the risk of endangering the remaining living hostages?
- Should Hamas's proposal be viewed as progress, or is it a tactical deception aimed at buying time and reinforcing the perception that Hamas continues—and will continue—to rule the Gaza Strip?
- How will Israel respond if the United States demands that it adopt an interim solution? How should it manage relations with the Trump administration, which presses for a ceasefire?
- Should Israel accept the Egyptian/Arab League proposal stipulating that Hamas will not govern Gaza but lacking a mechanism to guarantee the demilitarization of the Strip?
- Is there a way to disarm Hamas other than by Israel occupying Gaza?

**Position of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF):** The IDF is prepared to fully occupy the Gaza Strip and establish a temporary military administration. The military recommends a forceful operation to the political echelon while exercising caution to avoid further harm to the hostages. The proposed course of action includes the occupation of Gaza, a continued military presence, distribution of humanitarian aid, and temporary military governance.

**Dilemmas** faced by the IDF include balancing military pressure with the risk to the hostages' lives; expected limitations in available forces due to declining reserve enlistment and the need for operational readiness in additional fronts; and managing military attrition along with the economic consequences of a prolonged confrontation.

Israel's course of action includes conducting negotiations while employing force and ground assaults to demonstrate its determination to achieve its goals. Once it becomes clear that Hamas will not compromise and no means have been found to ensure the collapse of its rule and the demilitarization of the Strip, Israel will resume high-intensity fighting with the goal of occupying the Gaza Strip and distributing humanitarian aid to bring about Hamas's collapse.

**The central challenge that emerges is understanding the harm inflicted on Israel as a result of a prolonged state of war that lacks a clear political objective.**

### **Hamas**

Hamas is determined to maintain its strategic control over the Gaza Strip and its weapons arsenal. It remains committed to its struggle against Israel and its goal of taking over the entire Palestinian political system. Hamas exploits the negotiations with Israel to buy time for rearmament and reorganization. While the organization refuses any meaningful or

comprehensive disarmament, it is willing to accept arrangements with only semantic significance that would allow it to retain its military capabilities “under the radar.”

**Strategic objective:** Hamas seeks to present a pragmatic posture on the surface while its overarching goal is to preserve its rule in the Gaza Strip and continue its armed struggle; to rehabilitate its military and organizational strength; to use the hostage issue as leverage to pressure Israel and deepen internal polarization within Israeli society; to strengthen regional support through ties with Qatar, Turkey, and Iran; to undermine Israel’s international standing and legitimacy by highlighting the humanitarian crisis in Gaza; and to assert that the future of the Gaza Strip is a Palestinian issue—therefore rejecting any foreign control in the area. At most, Hamas may agree to be part of a Palestinian force, including the Palestinian Authority. Simultaneously, Hamas continues to encourage terrorism in the West Bank as compensation for the cessation of fighting in Gaza.

**Course of action:** Hamas shows a willingness to engage in prolonged negotiations while refusing to relinquish its positions or its insurance card—the captive Israeli soldiers. In parallel, Hamas is preparing for the next stage of the conflict by rebuilding its forces and planting explosives throughout Gaza.

**The central challenge:** Aside from Israel, no actor is willing—or positioned—to disarm Hamas.

#### **The Palestinian Authority**

**The strategic objective:** The PA’s President Mahmoud Abbas views the crisis in the Gaza Strip as an opportunity to restore the PA’s status and reclaim control over the Strip. Accordingly, the PA supports the Egyptian plan for Gaza’s recovery, reconstruction, and development—a plan in which it plays an integral role. The PA seeks to reestablish its monopoly over the Palestinian arena and is attempting to persuade the United States and Arab states to support it as the legitimate and viable alternative to Hamas’s rule, as well as to include it in processes aimed at achieving a regional settlement. The PA seeks to reassert its relevance as the only practical solution for civilian governance in the Gaza Strip, capitalizing on Hamas’s weakening.

The Palestinian public has no influence over Hamas—nor over the PA. Nevertheless, the PA’s standing has improved in the eyes of the public, as it is perceived as a force preventing the “Gazafication” of the West Bank and as a bulwark against the Israeli government’s annexationist intentions in the area. The prevailing sentiment among the Palestinian public is that there is no one they can truly rely on—thus, the PA is viewed as the lesser evil.

**Course of action:** Demonstrating readiness to renew its control over the Gaza Strip and to be integrated into a regional settlement. It opposes any framework under which Hamas would retain its military strength or governing authority in the Strip.

**The central challenge** for the PA is convincing the Israeli government that it is the least harmful option as there is no alternative Palestinian civil authority capable of facilitating Arab state involvement in replacing Hamas rule, expelling its leadership, and stabilizing and reconstructing the Strip.

## **The United States**

President Donald Trump is eager to achieve an agreement for the release of the hostages and a swift end to the war, as his primary focus is the architecture of a regional arrangement—normalization and expansion of the Abraham Accords—partly as a means to bolster his candidacy for a Nobel Peace Prize. He has exerted pressure on Israel to accept a compromise framework for the return of the hostages and to avoid a broader escalation. His administration is attempting to enlist the support of Arab states in the process to promote regional stability while demanding that Israel show flexibility in its positions—as long as it can present a significant diplomatic achievement.

**The strategic objective:** The Trump administration seeks a rapid end to the war, to prevent regional upheavals that could jeopardize normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, to conclude an improved nuclear agreement with Iran, and to preserve its relationship with Israel—viewing Israel as the executor of military initiatives.

**Course of action:** Pressuring Israel to accept the agreement framework proposed by the president’s envoy, Witkoff, as well as the Egyptian-Arab plan; assisting Israel in planning military alternatives; designing an international mechanism to oversee the removal of Hamas from civilian control in Gaza and its disarmament; and establishing regional alliances while offering incentives to any party that contributes to ending the war in the Gaza Strip and to Hamas’s disarmament.

**The central challenge:** Israel has lost its decision-making independence in relation to the Trump administration.

## **Egypt**

Egypt is actively working to secure a permanent ceasefire and facilitate the entry of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip while promoting a framework for establishing a temporary Palestinian administration that excludes Hamas. It aims to maintain control over the border with Gaza and to prevent the infiltration of individuals and security threats into its territory.

**Strategic objective:** Egypt seeks to preserve its role as a central mediator between Israel and Hamas; to prevent an escalation that would lead to an influx of Palestinian refugees into its territory; to avoid being drawn into governing Gaza; to promote a framework for an arrangement that would remove Hamas from civilian control in Gaza and weaken its military capacity; to secure a ceasefire while ensuring border stability with the Strip; and to lead and coordinate a recovery, reconstruction, and development program for Gaza with the participation of the broader Arab world.

**Course of action:** Pressuring Hamas to relinquish power in Gaza and agree to gradual disarmament while continuing to mediate with Israel; intensifying diplomatic efforts with the United States to pressure Israel toward restraint; and closely managing the Rafah border to allow humanitarian aid in while preventing migration and weapons smuggling.

**Central challenge:** Egypt has lost trust in Israel and suspects that the peace relations is no longer as vital to Israel as it once was.

## **Jordan**

Jordan supports the Egyptian framework, particularly the strengthening of the Palestinian Authority as a stabilizing force in both Gaza and the West Bank. It acts cautiously with the United States to avoid internal upheaval, especially regarding domestic sensitivities related to the Palestinian issue.

**Strategic objective:** Jordan seeks to apply pressure—through the United States—on Israel to establish stability in the West Bank; reinforce the PA’s status as the party to take control of Gaza to prevent the resurgence of Hamas; support the Egyptian–Arab framework for Gaza’s reconstruction; and maintain stability along Jordan’s borders.

**Course of action:** Assisting the PA in preparing to take control of the Strip (including preparing Palestinian forces to establish public order and internal security in Gaza); limiting Hamas’s activities in Jordan; closely coordinating with Saudi Arabia and Egypt to promote a regional settlement.

## **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia is interested in ending the fighting in Gaza quickly to continue its normalization talks with Israel and to strengthen its strategic ties with the Trump administration. The Saudis oppose Hamas and seek an end to its rule in Gaza but are willing to accept a compromise in which Hamas remains in the background with some commitment to future demilitarization.

**Strategic objective:** Saudi Arabia seeks to achieve a security alliance with the United States while maintaining strong ties with Israel; foster regional stability to enable progress in normalization—conditional on a political path toward the establishment of a Palestinian state; reduce Iranian influence in the Middle East; and avoid becoming entangled in the Gaza quagmire.

**Course of action:** Supporting the end of Hamas’s rule in Gaza; bolstering the Arab peace initiative to resolve the Israeli–Arab conflict; and formulating an updated Saudi plan for Gaza stabilization and reconstruction, which includes advancing the PA as the leading actor on the path to a Palestinian state and restoring its control over Gaza.

**Central challenge:** Normalization with Israel will not proceed if the war continues or if Israel occupies the Gaza Strip.

## **Qatar**

Qatar supports Hamas remaining a significant player in Gaza while continuing its role as a mediator between Israel and the organization. It seeks to preserve its influence in the arena through humanitarian aid while also maintaining good relations with the United States.

**Strategic objective:** Qatar seeks to prevent the collapse of Hamas and maintain its role as a mediator between Hamas and Western states; expand its influence in the Palestinian and inter-Arab arenas; and preserve close ties with the United States.



**Course of action:** Continued representation of and mediation for Hamas; advancing innovative proposals that would ensure Hamas's survival; and providing humanitarian assistance to the Gaza Strip.

**Central challenge:** The prospect of a forced break between Qatar and Hamas.

### Iran

Iran plays a secondary role in the current events but is expected to continue supporting Hamas to maintain an active front against Israel. It is highly wary of entering into direct military confrontation with the United States and seeks backing from China and Russia.

**Strategic objective:** Iran aims to preserve Hamas as a key actor in the so-called "axis of resistance"; entangle Israel in a prolonged and inconclusive war; move closer to Arab states; and promote a form of "parallel normalization."

**Course of action:** Continuing to arm Hamas, transferring funds, and smuggling weapons, with a particular focus on the West Bank; applying international pressure on Israel.

**Central challenge:** Whether Iran will use the war as cover to advance toward nuclear weapons.

### Hezbollah

In the current context of the fighting, Hezbollah has avoided direct escalation with Israel while continuing to assist Hamas in preparing for the next round of conflict.

**Strategic objective:** Hamas aims to restore its image of deterrence vis-à-vis Israel while creating leverage over the Lebanese government; to support Hamas without triggering a direct escalation with Israel; to focus on rebuilding the organization and, at this stage, to maintain Lebanon's internal political stability.

**Course of action:** Backing Hamas by transferring funds to recruit operatives and smuggling weapons while avoiding escalation with Israel—even in a scenario where Israel launches a high-intensity military operation to occupy Gaza.

**Central challenge:** Maintaining Lebanon's stabilization process and preventing Hezbollah from being drawn into southern Lebanon.

### Other Actors

**Turkey:** Turkey continues to view Hamas as a strategic partner and does not support the demilitarization of the Strip. Turkey is using the crisis to strengthen its position in the Muslim world, to deepen its influence in Syria, and maintain its role in the Middle East.

**European Union:** The EU is focused on preventing a humanitarian disaster in Gaza. It supports Egypt's efforts to promote a permanent ceasefire and backs the Egyptian–Arab reconstruction plan. The EU does not place any significant demands on Hamas or Israel, acting primarily through humanitarian and legal channels. It is unlikely to invest in Gaza's reconstruction due to its current focus on strengthening its own defense against Russia.



**The international community:** The international community increasingly views Israel as an occupying power that blatantly violates international law—specifically its obligations toward Gaza’s civilian population and international court rulings—while committing war crimes. At the same time, criticism of Israeli actions in the West Bank is mounting, particularly regarding the continued illegal annexation of the Palestinian territories. Israel faces mounting pressure through statements, reports, and resolutions demanding humanitarian aid access to Gaza and a renewal of the ceasefire. Steps to suspend Israel from the UN General Assembly are also being considered.

#### **Policy and Action Recommendations**

- a. Hamas declarations regarding a willingness to disarm must not be trusted; effective disarmament requires strong Arab guarantees accompanied by a practical international monitoring mechanism. Israel must not be tempted by an extended status quo; any delay will allow Hamas to regroup and rearm, all while retaining hostages—particularly soldiers—as leverage for its survival.
- b. Any framework that allows Hamas to retain its military power or remain part of the governing structure in Gaza must be rejected. (The simulation did not advance to a stage in which Hamas would be required to show flexibility and relinquish its military wing in exchange for remaining as a political-civil entity.) Israel can rely only on itself for the implementation of any security oversight arrangement in Gaza, the disarmament of Hamas, and the demilitarization of the Strip.
- c. The only means likely to incentivize the Arab states to take a more active role in stabilizing and reconstructing Gaza without Hamas rule is the intensification of Israeli military operations—while avoiding the imposition of a military government over Gaza, as this would place full responsibility on Israel and allow the Arab states to effectively absolve themselves of any responsibility for stabilization or reconstruction. At the same time, Israel should introduce initiatives that are uncomfortable for the Arab states—such as the “voluntary emigration” of Gaza residents, as proposed by President Trump—to compel them toward more constructive involvement.
- d. Israel must coordinate its strategy with the Trump administration and formulate preliminary understandings to generate realistic expectations and avoid being perceived as a burden on the administration.
- e. Coordination with Egypt and Jordan should be strengthened, assigning them a concrete role in implementing reforms within the Palestinian Authority to ensure it can gradually assume responsibility for governing Gaza.
- f. Israel should prevent any American–Saudi agreement from bypassing normalization with Israel. If Saudi Arabia views the PA as the legitimate Palestinian counterpart in a political settlement, it should be urged to apply

effective pressure on the PA to implement necessary reforms and build the capacities needed to govern the Gaza Strip.

- g. A pan-Arab and international consensus is needed to ensure that Arab or other states do not finance Hamas. It is recommended that Israel cooperate with the United States and Arab states—drawing on EU support—to enforce international oversight of financial flows into Gaza, particularly to Hamas.
- h. To prevent escalation in other arenas, political pressure must be applied on Iran to refrain from activating its proxies and from continuing to transfer weapons and funds to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This pressure should be coordinated with the United States, Russia, China, the Gulf states, and especially Saudi Arabia.

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