

Three Strategic Paths to Achieve the Objectives of the War—One Is Preferable

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Israel faces three possible strategic paths to achieving the objectives of the war: the occupation of the Gaza Strip and the imposition of a military administration; a siege on the Strip, in which Hamas is weakened and deterred; or an agreement to discuss the Arab proposal for the reconstruction and stabilization of the Strip and the establishment of an alternative governing authority. Of these three, the diplomatic path—discussing the Arab proposal—is the only option that could advance the war’s objectives at a relatively low cost. However, because the proposal has not been formulated to ensure Hamas’s complete dismantlement as a military force in the Strip, it has not been seriously considered by the Israeli government. The exclusion of the diplomatic proposal leaves Israel with only military options. Initially, Israel is applying military pressure to compel Hamas to agree to extend the first phase of the hostage release agreement. Failure or stagnation would lead to the expansion of the military campaign, potentially resulting in Israeli control over most of the Strip or the implementation of a wide-scale operation—an operation for which the IDF is prepared—that would involve the conquest of a large area (most of the Strip) and the establishment of conditions for military governance.

Currently, with American backing, Israel is applying calibrated military pressure on Hamas and the Gaza Strip to extend the first phase of the hostage release agreement and to motivate the organization to release additional live hostages—a top priority for Israeli society. However, it is unclear what strategic vision underlies this course of action. After all, Hamas still maintains sovereignty in the Strip. Even if more hostages are released, Hamas members are likely to continue holding captives—either as leverage for the organization’s survival or due to uncertainty about the whereabouts of some hostages. Thus, focusing on Hamas’s governing and military capabilities will become a primary objective.

From the beginning of the war until the ceasefire that collapsed, the Israeli government declared that it would not establish a military administration in the Gaza Strip. It also rejected the option of imposing a siege—citing legal concerns, constraints imposed by the Biden administration, and the recognition that Hamas’s continued rule in the Strip is untenable. As a result, the war’s strategy focused on creating a mechanism for an alternative civil governance structure. However, Israel has not defined what this alternative governance would be. Another issue is that Hamas remains committed to the principle of “resistance” in the tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood, and it cannot be eliminated through military means alone. The Muslim Brotherhood itself has survived in the West Bank, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and even within Israel itself, despite military pressure. Thus, it was clear from the outset that even under a new alternative civil governance, elements of Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood

would continue to exist in the Strip. Given this reality, the solution has been, and remains, Israel's continued responsibility for the security of the Gaza Strip.

Moreover, even if we assume that approximately half a million residents of the Gaza Strip were to relocate to another country—despite the low likelihood of implementing President Trump's "voluntary emigration" plan—this would still constitute a massive humanitarian displacement. While such a move might alleviate Gaza's demographic problem for a number of years, it would not resolve any of the underlying strategic issues. Thus, from a long-term perspective, the fundamental question remains: What is the plan for the Gaza Strip? A serious discussion about Gaza's future can no longer be deferred. In fact, this debate has persisted since the very first day of the war, repeatedly leading back to only three possible end-state scenarios:

- A. The full occupation of the Gaza Strip and the establishment of an Israeli military administration;
- B. The continuation of the civilian siege on Gaza, leaving a weakened Hamas in place until its eventual internal collapse;
- C. The establishment of an alternative Palestinian civil administration to replace Hamas, with Israel maintaining responsibility for security (including continuing operations to prevent terrorism and to block the rebuilding of Hamas's military capabilities).

Each of these options is complex to implement and involves significant challenges and risks. However, in order to choose the least harmful one, the three alternatives must be assessed within the current context:

A. Occupation of the Gaza Strip and Establishment of a Military administration

The advantage of a military administration in the Gaza Strip lies in its capacity to advance the war's objectives regarding Hamas. The replacement of the Hamas government would be carried out by Israel. The distribution of all humanitarian aid would be managed by the IDF, thereby denying Hamas the ability to sell or use it as a tool for civilian control. A prolonged presence on the ground would enhance intelligence-gathering capabilities, accelerate the degradation of Hamas's capabilities, and contribute to operational achievements against the organization. At the same time, however, a military administration would lack legitimacy both among the residents of the Strip and in the international arena, and its economic cost would be high, with significant consequences for Israel's economy.

The occupation itself would be extremely complex but feasible. The stages would include:

1. Conquest of all above-ground territory (either through a gradual campaign or a comprehensive operation);
2. Clearing the area both above and below ground;
3. Re-dividing the Strip into territorial sectors (regional brigades);

4. Assigning a military government representative to each city and neighborhood, who would liaise with local leadership and operate the local administration;
5. Addressing residents' welfare through two concentric circles, the first and immediate focused on those in combat zones by ensuring their safety, providing shelters for the displaced, distributing food, and supplying medical services;
6. Depending on the duration of the military administration, all civilian needs would be addressed under the Civil Administration model.

Post-Occupation Challenges:

1. Territorial defense would require a large force, necessarily at the expense of troops in the West Bank and along the northern border. This could lead to decreased security and a rise in attacks in those areas. Estimated reserve force requirement: five regional brigades within the Strip and two more outside it—amounting to 15 to 21 battalions, comparable to the force deployed in the West Bank and four times larger than that along the northern border. This would necessitate reliance on reserves unless there is a massive recruitment of the Ultra-Orthodox.
2. Direct financial cost—assuming no financial contribution from foreign states or the Palestinian Authority (PA), Israel would have to fund all needs of the area. As a benchmark, when the PA fully financed the Strip, the budget stood at \$120 million per month (approximately NIS 5.3 billion annually).
3. The large-scale reserve mobilization would indirectly harm the Israeli economy due to the prolonged absence of reservists from the productive sector.
4. The burden on reservists, combined with the policing nature of the tasks, could result in decreased motivation, potentially threatening responsiveness to future mobilization calls.
5. Lack of international legitimacy would negatively impact Israel's trade relations and overall economy. Many countries, except the United States, could view a renewed occupation as illegal and disproportionate. The gravest threat would be a de facto European boycott—informal yet impactful.
6. Last but not least—antisemitism. The struggle against Israel may fuel a surge in antisemitic incidents against Jewish communities worldwide.

B. Siege on the Strip—"A Weakened and Deterred Hamas"

According to this approach, Israel would impose a partial siege on the Hamas-controlled Strip. Reconstruction and commerce would be prohibited, and Israel would seek to deepen the wedge between the population and Hamas. This idea, which was not feasible during the Biden administration, appears more viable under Trump's presidency. President Trump seemingly has no objection to supporting Israel even as it restricts humanitarian aid entering the Strip. The long-term goal Israel seeks to achieve through a siege is to compel Hamas to relinquish control over the Gaza Strip due to extreme pressure and its preference to hand over reconstruction to another entity.

However, a significant strategic risk inherent in the siege option is that Hamas could portray it as a victory and as proof that it successfully confronted Israel's military challenge, resulting in Israel's withdrawal from the Strip, leaving Hamas to confront a siege—a scenario with which it is already familiar. Under siege conditions, Hamas is still likely to seize incoming aid, and Israel would struggle to ensure that aid reaches the population. This would create a dilemma between total starvation of the population—exposing Israel to accusations of war crimes—and allowing Hamas to survive in a weakened yet viable state. Past experience suggests that Hamas would redirect popular anger toward Israel, possibly through mass demonstrations and bolstering the international campaign accusing Israel of war crimes.

The implications of this campaign for Israel's standing in the international arena could damage its economy, although the pressure would likely be less severe than in the scenario of full occupation and military rule, as Israel has already been a target of criticism for maintaining a blockade on Gaza for several years.

The central problem with the siege scenario is a perceived military defeat: For the first time, Israel fails to achieve the stated war objectives—hostages remain in captivity, and Hamas remains in power. Furthermore, the strategic implications go far beyond the Gaza Strip. The United States, too, may interpret this as a sign of weakness—and in President Trump's world, there is no support for weak nations or leaders (see, for example, his meeting with Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House).

As for the attrition of Hamas and the possibility of internal collapse—there are early signs of popular unrest against the organization, with calls to end the war and remove the leadership. It is still too early to assess the scope of this protest and whether the leadership will actually be forced to flee the Strip to escape public fury. Meanwhile, Hamas has already proven its willingness to brutally suppress dissent. Therefore, skepticism regarding the success of such protests is warranted, especially at this time when paranoia is rampant among Hamas's leadership—justifiably so—and one must consider that any grassroots resistance would likely be crushed with an iron fist.

In the background, it is possible that severe humanitarian conditions, potentially escalating into a crisis, could encourage emigration among those with access to another Arab country. However, the poor and powerless majority in Gaza would be portrayed as innocent victims of Israel's war machine, and donations would begin to flow—including to Hamas. The first to donate would likely be Qatar, which seeks to ensure the continuation of the Muslim Brotherhood project it champions in the Strip.

C. Alternative Civil Governance with Hamas Remaining Underground

The main advantage of this alternative lies in the economic realm. Given a technocratic government—an alternative civil administration—Hamas would no longer control the distribution of humanitarian aid and would therefore not be able to capitalize on it economically. Gradually, its civilian standing would also erode. Israel could view such a situation as achieving its war objectives. However, a significant drawback would be Hamas's continued underground presence. Some would rightly argue that it would only be a matter of time before Hamas operatives throw the representatives of the alternative governance from

rooftops, as they did to members of the PA in 2007. Hamas would continue to grow stronger, along with the threat it poses.

These disadvantages were already recognized at the beginning of the war when it was decided that establishing an alternative governance in the Strip was the preferred model. The solution devised was to maintain Israeli responsibility for security and to continue eroding Hamas's capabilities through a sustained operational campaign over many months until it was fully weakened. A secondary response considered was building local forces in Gaza to enforce law and order. The plan was to train about 5,000 qualified personnel in Jordan, under American training programs, and return them to Gaza as law enforcement officers whose salaries would be paid by an entity unaffiliated with Hamas. Over time, this could result in Hamas being reduced to the level of threat it currently represents in the West Bank, even if it does not disappear entirely.

Although this model was Israel's initial preference at the outset of the war, it was never implemented due to the lack of a defined civil authority to replace Hamas. The Egyptian and Emirati proposals for the reconstruction and stabilization of the Strip, with Hamas excluded from governance, are currently the closest to Israel's strategic interests. However, Israel rejected both proposals. Each plan includes an international coalition of Arab and Western countries responsible for the reconstruction of Gaza and for oversight of the civil council. Both proposals also envision a non-Hamas security force responsible for distributing humanitarian aid. Moreover, in both proposals, the PA would not be directly involved, but it would be required to approve the arrangement. The difference between the two proposals concerns the nature of the governing body in Gaza: The Emirati proposal envisions a supreme appointed authority, whereas the Egyptian plan outlines a civil committee composed of Gazans unaffiliated with either the PA or Hamas.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Before intensifying military pressure on the Gaza Strip, it is essential to define the desired end-state: Of the three alternatives, which one constitutes the political framework that the military action is meant to serve? Each objective corresponds to a different systemic (operational) design, and therefore, the decision must be made before the maneuver begins, not during it. All three alternatives are problematic. From a purely military standpoint, a military administration is preferable. From a broader national security perspective (including economic, military, societal, and diplomatic considerations), the technocratic government model is preferable. In any case, the continuation of Hamas's rule is the worst option and must be avoided, making the siege alternative also unattractive.

If an alternative civil government is the least bad option, its inherent problems must be addressed, and efforts must be made to prevent the emergence in Gaza of a "Hezbollah model"—a powerful armed militia operating within a state framework, paralyzing it and threatening its internal stability. The following must take place:

1. A security regime must be established that will allow Israel to continue operating against Hamas's capabilities—to the extent that any remain.

2. Measures must be planned to ensure the survival of the alternative government in the Strip, given the certainty that Hamas will seek to regain strength and overthrow it.
3. The security components—beyond the regime that enables Israeli action to thwart threats—must be defined to ensure Hamas’s containment and restriction. These components should include an updated defense concept for the communities of the western Negev.
4. Personal security is the most significant element; a Palestinian police force must be established in the Gaza Strip, one that operates in coordination with Israel and enables Israeli operations in the Strip—similar to the joint operations between the IDF and the PA in the West Bank.

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