

Let Us Not Deceive Ourselves About a Deal to End the War in Gaza

Azar Gat | No. 1995 | July 6, 2025

Once the Israeli-Iranian exchange of blows ended impressively, the question of continuing the war in the Gaza Strip has returned to the center of public controversy in Israel, inextricably tied to the issue of the remaining hostages still held by Hamas. Disagreements and differing predictions about the future—always marked by uncertainty—are legitimate. So too are the value-based differences that guide decision-making, for which no objective resolution exists—only a decision about what norms to adopt and what not to, after weighing all possibilities and consequences, both factual and moral. At this stage, there is no assurance that continuing the campaign in the Gaza Strip—politically or militarily—holds promise. That said, before making difficult decisions, we must not deceive ourselves in evaluating the options currently on the table with regard to the proposed deals to end the war in Gaza.

Positions on the war and the conditions for its conclusion, as commonly expressed in Israeli discourse, largely correspond to political affiliation. Therefore, alongside the critique this article offers of the assumptions underlying the proposed deal to end the war in Gaza, I hold that the discourse—now spreading from the far-right parties of the current Israeli government to its center—regarding mass deportations from, and Israeli annexations and settlements in Gaza, is causing immense harm to Israel. Israel's deteriorating standing in Europe stems directly from this discourse. Domestically as well, the current coalition and the justified suspicions regarding its motives—both ideological and personal-opportunistic—cause significant damage. This has bearing on the public and partisan debate over the war and the conditions for its resolution. We are all imbued with deep emotional, moral, and political commitments, which rightly influence our positions on the issues at hand. But the assessment of estimated facts—on all sides—must not be subjugated to those commitments.

Claims in Favor of the Deal

"The Egyptian-Arab Plan": The likelihood that Hamas will disarm or be disarmed as part of this plan is virtually nonexistent. The plan makes no such demand, as the Arab states that endorsed it fully recognize the limits of what is realistically achievable. Fortunately, earlier proposals to deploy Arab forces in Gaza appear to have been abandoned. No Arab state is willing to enter the hornet's nest of Gaza or confront Hamas, for which it has no domestic public legitimacy. The presence of Arab forces will only prevent Israel from operating against Hamas militarily over the heads of the Arab forces. The forces of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and similar Palestinian actors lack the ability to fight Hamas—and they are fully aware of that. Since the start of the war in Gaza, I have advocated a declarative Israeli stance supporting the

PA's entry into Gaza on the "day after," a position that would have greatly improved Israel's international standing. However, the prospect of non-Hamas Palestinian control of Gaza depends on additional and significant weakening of Hamas. In this context, there is no inherent contradiction between Israel's ongoing military operation in Gaza and the "Egyptian Plan." On the contrary, the two should be seen as two complementary arms of a strategic pincer: The military threat, applied gradually, may help create the necessary conditions for the emergence of a non-Hamas Palestinian authority in the Gaza Strip. Iran's defeat, coupled with continued Israeli military pressure, also strengthens the prospect—it is difficult to assess its viability—that Hamas will eventually agree to the expulsion of its leadership and cadre of key operatives from the Gaza Strip. Without military pressure, there is no chance of this happening.

"It will be possible to prevent a repeat of the October 7 failure even if Hamas rebuilds its power": (as is highly likely to happen, with Hamas seizing part of the international aid that will flow into Gaza). This may be so. But beyond a repeat of October 7 and the other implications of Hamas's military recovery, there is also the renewed threat of rockets that Hamas will likely resume—serving as both a deterrent and a source of ongoing disruption. Does anyone doubt how the Israeli public would react if the situation in the Gaza border communities and across Israel returns to its previous state? An Israeli withdrawal under these conditions would be perceived as a resounding failure.

"There's no point in continuing the war until the last Hamas fighter is killed": Indeed, there is not. That objective is unachievable—and it is not the goal. The objective is to further weaken Hamas, eliminate the remainder of its command structure, and dismantle more of its units and infrastructure to a level that allows for the breakdown of its de facto rule in the Gaza Strip. In recent months, the IDF has eliminated Muhammad Sinwar and senior commanders around him, and real chance must be given to the critical effort currently underway to sever Hamas's control over incoming supplies to the Gaza Strip. In this context, there are clear signs of Hamas's eroding control. This chokehold on Hamas must not be relaxed. If Israel withdraws from the Gaza Strip and is not present on the ground, Hamas is expected to resume its control over both supplies and the territory itself. The return of supply arrangements to their former format is, in fact, one of Hamas's explicit conditions for the deal. Anyone who supports a deal to which Hamas is a party must take this into account.

"Hamas is willing to give up rule over the Gaza Strip": This must be clarified. Hamas is indeed willing to give up civil administration of the Gaza Strip. It is not willing to relinquish de facto control, which it enforces through its military force. This is a vast and critical distinction, which some commentators deliberately obscure.

"We have never defeated our enemies to the extent we seek to achieve in Gaza": That is incorrect. Israel decisively ended the Second Intifada in the West Bank and replaced Arafat's regime and strategic line with that of Mahmoud Abbas. Since then, the PA security forces, despite their leader's shortcomings and their own known limitations, have cooperated significantly with Israel on security.

“The proposed agreement in Gaza resembles the one we achieved with Hezbollah in Lebanon”: Hezbollah, as is well known, represents one of the four major sects in Lebanon, three of which are exploiting the organization’s weakening. Palestinian society is not divided in this way, and its position in the conflict with Israel is not comparable to that of the Lebanese Shiites, whose main focus is internal Lebanese politics. Furthermore, the tunnels in the Gaza Strip present a particularly difficult and unique problem, unlike in Lebanon, due to the difference in terrain. In Lebanon, airstrikes relying on precise intelligence have indeed destroyed and continue to destroy Hezbollah targets. In Gaza, the invisible enemy is entirely embedded underground. The moment Israel withdraws from the Gaza Strip, Hamas will quickly acquire de facto immunity from meaningful military strikes.

“What we haven’t achieved militarily in Gaza after a year and a half probably can’t be achieved”: Two years passed from the outbreak of the Second Intifada until Operation Defensive Shield to reoccupy the West Bank was launched, and another two years until the Intifada was fully suppressed. And all of that, then as now, was conducted against the background of a mostly hostile international community and with significant American constraints (together with critical assistance) on Israeli action. The Israeli chief of staff recently estimated that the intensified Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip would take about two months. Let’s hope that is the case. The results of the operation and the breaking of Hamas’s grip on the supply routes may indeed pave the way for the entry of a non-Hamas Palestinian administration into the Strip—an arrangement that would necessarily need to be backed by Israeli bayonets, as in the West Bank. Any other end to the war will lead to Hamas’s recovery and its return to control of Gaza.

The Terrible Question of the Hostages

The debate over Israel’s position regarding the tragic and searing issue of the hostages has become taboo. It is agreed that supreme efforts should be made and high prices paid to secure their release. But any further discussion throughout the war is silenced by cries of “now” and “at any cost.” Yet no country—including Israel—can truly pay “any cost.” It has other existential and no less critical considerations, including those factored in blood.

On October 7, 251 individuals were abducted to Gaza, some of whom were already dead. Before and during the first deal, 85 living Israeli hostages and 24 foreign nationals were released. Eight additional hostages were rescued alive by the IDF afterward. Twenty-eight more were freed in the second deal, and one was released by Hamas as a gesture to the United States and President Trump. In total, 136 hostages were freed alive. Currently, 20 living hostages remain in Gaza, meaning that 85 were killed—some during the abduction and some during the war, by their captors or as a result of IDF operations in the Gaza Strip.

The hostages are Hamas’s greatest asset and today represent the guarantee of its survival. Hamas has intended—and continues to intend—to extract the maximum value for them. The maximum—this should have been clear from the outset—meant all the security prisoners held in Israel, about 10,000 individuals, including those who carried out the October 7 massacre. This was the situation before the IDF’s ground incursion into Gaza and during the early stages of the campaign. We will not address here the inevitable impact that such a mass release—

hundreds of cheering buses—would have had on the Palestinian and Arab public across the Middle East, which was intoxicated by the success of October 7 and gripped by jihadist fervor. We will only note that the release of thousands, including those who were the yeast in the dough of Hamas and other organizations—its leadership and veteran fighters—would have massively strengthened Hamas’s infrastructure in Gaza and dramatically increased the blood price of the Israeli offensive. Make no mistake—Sinwar would not have compromised on anything. All the cards were in his hands before the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip.

Some argue that all this is speculative—“maybe” versus “certain”—and that there is no way to know the true cost in blood of such a deal. As if there is no clear empirical basis for the answer: the breakdown of all restraints began with the Jibril Deal in 1985, in which 1,151 Palestinian prisoners were released in exchange for three Israeli soldiers. The outcome was summarized by Ze’ev Schiff and Ehud Yaari as follows (quoted from their book *Intifada*, Schocken, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1990; cited on Wikipedia in Hebrew):

This deal virtually emptied the prisons of security prisoners and sent hundreds of trained and ideologically committed operatives back into the territories. There is no longer any doubt that the released prisoners... played a central role in the Intifada. According to credible estimates, over a third of them resumed underground activity in one form or another within just a year of their release. Most of the others got involved almost immediately when the first wave of riots broke out.

In the Shalit Deal (2011), 1,027 Palestinian prisoners were released—including Sinwar—in exchange for Gilad Shalit. Not only did Israel pay dearly—again and again, in blood—for these deals, but the abduction of Israelis has since become the central objective of terrorist organizations.

Some say: “We’ll just kill the thousands of released Palestinians, as we did with past deals.” Indeed, we killed many of them—but not before those released in the Jibril and Shalit deals murdered Israelis by the hundreds and thousands.

Opponents of the deals have pointed to a psychological phenomenon: the well-known names and faces of the hostages entirely overshadow the faceless anonymity of the many who would be killed later—people who also have parents, spouses, and children. Indeed, most supporters of a “whatever the cost” deal entirely ignore this record and its implications. A few of them, it seems, consciously believe that even if this is the price in blood, there is a moral obligation to pay it. Such a value-based calculus is not up for debate—one must simply decide whether or not to accept it.

The IDF’s invasion of Gaza forced Hamas to drastically compromise on the number of Palestinian prisoners released in the first and second deals. However, before the breakdown of the second ceasefire, Hamas declared that in the third deal (Phase B), new conditions would apply to hostage releases—specifically, 200 to 300 Palestinian prisoners per hostage, meaning a total of 4,000–6,000 prisoners. When Hamas rejected the latest offer from President Trump’s envoy, Steve Witkoff, it stated, among other things, that the number of Palestinian prisoners proposed—125 serving life sentences and 1,111 terrorists from Gaza in exchange for 10 Israeli hostages (half of those still held)—was too small.

It is unclear how much Hamas was or would be willing to compromise on these figures in negotiations. But since the hostages are its primary bargaining chip, it has no incentive to compromise. On the contrary—it is interested in dragging out negotiations indefinitely, insisting on the full evacuation of the Gaza Strip and an internationally guaranteed ceasefire, to ensure its survival as Gaza’s de facto ruler—a position that would also guarantee access to the flood of international aid destined for the Gaza Strip. Once the hostages become the exclusive focus of discussion, Hamas dictates the rules. And since not only 251 or 20 hostages, but any number is considered worth “any price,” there is a real concern that Hamas will retain a certain number of captives as a long-term reserve.

There is currently an overwhelming majority in Israeli public opinion in favor of a deal to release the remaining hostages, seemingly at any price. But it is doubtful whether that readiness will persist once the full cost becomes clear. What seems evident is that if and when Hamas returns to power in Gaza as a result of the deal, rebuilds its power, and resumes rocket harassment and deterrence against Israel—whether or not it threatens a massive invasion—no government would survive the wave of frustration and rage over the perceived return to square one.

One may hope, even if there is no certainty, that continued massive military pressure in the Gaza Strip will enable another hostage deal under terms acceptable to Israel—and perhaps even Hamas’s agreement to the departure of its leadership and a large portion of its fighters from the Gaza Strip. What must not be allowed is Hamas’s return to power in Gaza and the restoration of its infrastructure.

“We’ll Resume the Fighting Later?”

“We can always resume the fighting afterward”: And this is said by those who believe that Israel has reached the absolute limit of its ability to continue the war, both internationally and domestically. But can we truly restart everything—from the beginning—once Hamas has rebuilt its infrastructure and refilled its ranks? Can we pay that price all over again? Really? Re-invade the Gaza Strip? Limited airstrikes and ground raids will yield very meager results given the vast underground dimension in Gaza, where Hamas, its facilities, and its workshops will vanish.

All of this places Israel before very difficult strategic and military dilemmas that must not be blurred. It is unclear how much freedom of military action the international system—especially the Trump administration, which, like its predecessor, has insisted on the disarmament of Hamas, along with EU countries—will allow. Without the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent shift in US policy, it is unclear how the Second Intifada would have ended. Israel’s ability to continue dismantling Hamas and suppressing its control over the territory and incoming supplies is being tested. The internal political-partisan rift in Israel has a devastating effect on the country’s ability to manage the war. But an IDF withdrawal from the Gaza Strip at this stage would almost certainly lead to Hamas’s return.

The combination of statements such as “On the way to destroying Hamas, we’ll destroy whatever remains of Gaza” (Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich) and “Our goal is to take control of Gaza and implement President Trump’s vision” (Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu) has already caused, and will continue to cause, a real PR disaster—both regionally and internationally, as well as within Israeli society. It is reasonable to assume that Netanyahu understands there will be no population transfer, nor settlements in Gaza—as well as the external and internal costs of such declarations. But he continues to play the political game, with the clear aim of maintaining hope among the extremists in his coalition that their vision may yet be fulfilled. The great success of the operation against Iran has given him, and Israel, considerable credit, and it is not clear how he will choose to take advantage of it. In any case, in the wake of the ongoing turnabout in the war – in Gaza, Lebanon, and now in Iran – Hamas should not be accepted as a de facto ruler of the Gaza Strip.

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