The Agreement to End the War—and What Comes Next?

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The agreement that has been reached is a tremendous achievement for Israel. It includes what Hamas had refused until now: the immediate release of all the hostages, thereby relinquishing its principal bargaining chip before the IDF withdraws from the Gaza Strip, and a demilitarization clause that appears in the agreement—even if Hamas avoided formally accepting it. For Hamas, this clause is a double-edged sword: If it complies, it loses; if it does not, it will face political and military attacks for violating the agreement, without the hostages in its hands. The top priority for all sides was Phase One—and rightly so, because without it, there would have been no agreement at all, with all of its advantages for Israel.

However, the next phase is extremely uncertain and doubtful. It is far more likely that Hamas will not disarm, will work to preserve its presence and even to restore its practical control on the ground, and will make a major effort to rebuild its power. The key issue in the demilitarization framework is the neutralization of the tunnels. Internationalizing the territory by introducing foreign forces would be a grave mistake. Yet, following the agreement, there are also opportunities for progress toward broader agreements, foremost among them the expansion of the Abraham Accords. The notion of a "New Middle East," which was far-fetched in its time, is at best a long-term project for years and generations to come. Still, it is good that the US administration has presented it as a vision for the region's future.

Attitudes in Israel toward the agreement ending the war in the Gaza Strip and the processes that led to it are fixed along ideological, political, and partisan lines and are dominated by them. Intertwined with this is a fierce struggle over the narrative that will precede the elections. In such situations, when positions reflect deeply rooted identity-based commitments, arguments coming from "the other side" are perceived as absurd and illegitimate, while those of "our side" are seen as embodying truth and justice—so self-evident that it is hard to fathom how anyone could be blind to them. This is not to say that Israel's political and ideological divisions are not about profoundly substantive issues concerning the Arab–Israeli conflict and the country's future. But it is implausible that every argument from the other side is always and entirely invalid. Nothing in the recent decades of the conflict's history or in the arguments and initiatives of either of the two Israeli camps supports such a view. One of the clearest signs of an effort toward objective judgment is the ability to identify arguments from the other side that do—or could—contain some measure of validity.

The agreement reached for the return of the Israeli hostages held by Hamas and for the cessation of the war in the Gaza Strip is an enormous achievement for Israel—in fact, it practically saved the country from severe distress. It includes what Hamas had refused until now: the immediate release of all living hostages, thereby relinquishing its principal bargaining

chip before the IDF withdraws from Gaza (at this stage, the IDF remains in 53% of the territory), and a demilitarization clause included in the American draft of the agreement, approved by the regional partners, even though Hamas avoided accepting it. For Hamas, this clause is a double-edged sword: if it accepts it, it loses; if it refuses, it will be attacked politically and militarily as a violator of the agreement, without the hostages in its possession. There is reason to assume that Israeli strikes in such a scenario would, on the whole, receive American backing, just as the IDF's attacks in Lebanon, aimed at disrupting Hezbollah's efforts to rebuild its infrastructure, have been supported by the United States. President Donald Trump hinted at this in his address to the Knesset and in subsequent remarks.

An agreement of this kind—bolstered by the president's prestige and influence—had not previously been on the table, not a year and a half ago and not six months ago, contrary to what many claim. It is the product of Israel's credible threat to capture Gaza City—a prospect that was bad for both Israel and Hamas but served, as it was declared at the time, also as a means of pressure (so much for "pressure doesn't work," which has become an article of faith for many). In this poker game, Hamas lost, partly because the continuation of the war—and perhaps even Israel's failed strike against the organization's leadership in Qatar—alarmed the Arab states and enabled Trump to close the deal.

In the months preceding the signing of the agreement, it was claimed that the deals proposed by the Americans were based on drafts passed to them by Ron Dermer, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's envoy. Now, the claim has flipped: The deal is said to be Trump's—and indeed, it is his, and his contribution to achieving it was indeed decisive. But first, the president "forced" Hamas, and only afterward Netanyahu (particularly concerning the prospect of a future Palestinian state once conditions are ripe—a notion uncomfortable for the prime minister given his political base). This was the proper sequence, contrary to what many in Israel and abroad implied. It should be noted that, in my assessment, Netanyahu was quite happy to be "forced" into this agreement. Contrary to popular claims, holding the next elections while the war was still ongoing and while the hostages were either still in captivity or dead could have been catastrophic for him.

The composition of the current coalition, along with the statements of its ministers and Knesset members—often with Netanyahu's silence or tacit nod to the far right—inflicted enormous diplomatic damage on Israel throughout the war. To this must be added the significant deterioration that followed President Trump's proposed plan for the emigration of Gaza's residents, which swept up Israel's messianic-annexationist-settler right in the belief that all its dreams were suddenly coming true. Conversely, it should also be said that the opposition's stance of favoring a ceasefire at practically every stage of the war was misguided and, to a considerable extent, driven by public pressure from the streets. Netanyahu will likely exploit this in the upcoming election campaign.

The government's firm rejection of any role for the Palestinian Authority in the postwar Gaza Strip remains a grave mistake. This was evident from the outset of the war, and the position has potentially damaging implications for the future as well. A Palestinian force in Gaza would not have fought Hamas, but it would have been the only guarantee of Israeli freedom of action wherever Hamas violated the ceasefire agreement. Internationalizing the conflict by bringing in foreign forces—Arab or otherwise—stemming paradoxically from Israel's own stance,

would be highly detrimental to Israel. Such forces would make any Israeli military operation in Gaza nearly impossible and are likely to do very little against Hamas, even if they wanted to—and it is doubtful how much they would want to. Still, no Arab states (other than the United Arab Emirates) appear eager to enter the Gaza Strip. Arab leaders understand all too well the depth of the potential entanglement and the domestic backlash it would cause among their own publics. Ready to fill the void, Turkish or Qatari forces would actively assist Hamas, and Israel must adamantly oppose their entry into Gaza.

It is hard to envision any incoming civil administration and international forces in Gaza genuinely cooperating with Israel or being attentive to its security and other concerns. One may assume that the United States and its representatives will make a genuine effort to enforce the agreement for which they are the principal brokers and guarantors. Yet, even if everyone has already learned that saying "no" to Trump is unwise, it would hardly be surprising if the agreement's implementation were met with the familiar Middle Eastern repertoire of foot-dragging, doublespeak, and evasions by all Arab parties involved. In any case, Israel must insist—consistent with its declared diplomatic position—on the full implementation of every clause of the agreement.

The top priority for all sides was Phase One, and rightly so, because without it there would have been no agreement at all, with all its benefits for Israel. The continuation is highly uncertain and doubtful, and Israel will have to navigate it, now that all the living hostages have returned and Hamas is ostensibly bound by the agreement.

Assessments regarding the implementation of Phase Two are necessarily speculative. The likelihood that the agreement will be carried out fully and in good faith is low. The most probable scenario is that Hamas will not disarm, will act to preserve its presence, and to a large extent will even seek to reestablish practical control over the territory alongside any civil authority entering Gaza. It will replenish its ranks and make a major effort to rebuild its strength—far from what it was on October 7, 2023, but it will still be a terrorist army with significant capabilities. In such a case, Israel may resume combat operations, and as things currently stand—likely with American consent.

While the collection of small arms from Hamas is virtually impossible and of lesser importance, neutralizing the remaining tunnels, which also serve as the infrastructure for renewing missile production workshops, is the key issue moving forward. The tunnels and the immense difficulty in dealing with them are the reason the war in Gaza lasted two years, required more divisions than the IDF deployed against the Egyptian army in the Six-Day War or the Yom Kippur War, and prevented a decisive victory. This is the core difference that explains why, in contrast, against both Hezbollah and Iran, the IDF achieved decisive results in a very short period of active fighting.

In a more optimistic scenario, Hamas would hand over the tunnels to the interim administration and supervisory bodies. This scenario seems less likely, as it would signal Hamas's defeat and, more importantly, expose it to Israeli attack without its principal military asset—both defensively and offensively. Among other reasons, Hamas does not trust Israel to uphold its side of the agreement, despite American guarantees.

Politically, if Hamas does not disarm and continues to maintain de facto control over roughly half of the Gaza Strip beyond the "yellow line" marking Israel's withdrawal boundary, it would be advisable to make a serious effort to implement Clause 17 of the Trump Plan: to introduce a Palestinian administration, establish policing forces (preferably Palestinian), and—most importantly—to enable international reconstruction efforts only in the areas not controlled by Hamas. Differentiating in this way during the reconstruction process would significantly increase pressure on Hamas from the population in the territory under its control and is likely to lead to migration toward the rebuilt zones.

The diplomatic damage Israel has suffered as a result of the Gaza campaign has been extremely severe, much of it, as noted, stemming from statements made by members of the coalition and government. Yet, it is worth recalling that Israel was completely isolated—apart from American support—during the Yom Kippur War and the grim years that followed, as well as during the Second Intifada. Still remembered is the overtly hostile visit to Jerusalem by French President Jacques Chirac during that period. It is unclear where Israel would have ended up had the global situation not changed after 9/11, which ultimately led to Israel's reoccupation of the West Bank in Operation Defensive Shield. In both those cases, as in the current war, Israel had no choice but to first achieve a decisive military outcome. Without such outcomes, Israel cannot survive in the Middle East—nor can it hope for any political progress toward peace.

Indeed, following the October 7th disaster, Israel dismantled the Iranian "ring of fire" that had been tightening around it for years, inflicted severe damage on Hezbollah, launched a crushing attack on Iran, destroyed most of Hamas's military formations and infrastructure in Gaza, crushed the jihadist euphoria that had swept across the Middle East and the soaring hopes that Israel's end was imminent, and fully restored its deterrence.

Even regarding the operation in Iran, some voices in Israel expressed criticism and serious doubts about its success—as if other options, in the face of an emerging critical threat, would have offered better prospects, given the reality created by Trump's 2018 withdrawal from the nuclear deal (encouraged by Netanyahu), after which Iran accumulated some 400 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60%. It remains to be seen where the attack will lead in terms of Iran's progress toward military nuclear capability. But for the first time, the United States carried out a direct military strike on Iran's nuclear program, with all the political and military implications that entails.

Iran's defeat and the collapse of the jihadist ring of fire, together with the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, have led to a strengthening of the pro-American axis in the Middle East. Within this framework, significant yet discreet intelligence and operational cooperation took place throughout the war between Arab states and Israel. Moreover, for the first time in the Arab world, long mired in failure and stagnation, the beginnings of successful modernization processes are emerging—so far mainly in the energy-rich Gulf emirates and, facing far greater cultural and social obstacles, also in Saudi Arabia. It remains to be seen how deeply these processes will penetrate the Arab world's core and influence it, as well as the Arab–Israeli conflict. There now appear to be genuine prospects for progress toward regional agreements, primarily the expansion of the Abraham Accords, which entails designating an end to the Israeli occupation as a goal.

For Israel, ending the occupation and separating from the Palestinians is a vital necessity, but it takes two to tango. Among the Palestinians, no real change can yet be discerned in their fundamental goals and positions. In the latest survey conducted by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), roughly half of those polled in the West Bank said Israel had no right to exist and expressed their belief that it would not survive. At the same time, the long-standing Palestinian record, justifying all of Israel's fears, has driven a dangerous radicalization of positions within Israel itself (see my article, "What Is the Problem With the Palestinian Problem?"). The idea of a "New Middle East," absurd in its time, is, at best, a project for years and generations to come. Still, it is good that the American administration has reintroduced it as a vision for the region's future, and every practical step in this direction should be welcomed and pursued.

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