STARTING FROM THE GROUND UP
U.S. Policy Options for Post-Hamas Gaza

A report by
Michael Koplow
Shira Efron
Study Authors

Dr. Michael Koplow is the chief policy officer of Israel Policy Forum, and also serves as a research fellow of the Kogod Research Center at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. Before coming to Israel Policy Forum, he was the founding program director of the Israel Institute. He holds a Ph.D. in Government from Georgetown University, where he specialized in political development and ideology, and the politics of Middle Eastern states. He writes Israel Policy Forum’s weekly Koplow Column and edits Israel Policy Exchange, which is a leading source for commentary and analysis on Israel and American Jewry. In addition to his Ph.D., he holds a B.A. from Brandeis University, a J.D. from New York University, and a masters in Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University.

Dr. Shira Efron is the Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Senior Director of Policy Research. Concurrently, she also serves as a special climate change advisor to Israel’s Ministry of Defense and the co-chair of the subgroup on regional cooperation of President Herzog’s climate forum. Dr. Efron has spent over 15 years in U.S. think tanks, including the RAND Corporation, where she founded and led the Israel program between 2016-2022, the Center for American Progress, and Middle East Institute, and the Tel Aviv based Institute for National Security Studies. She was previously a consultant with the U.N. country team in Jerusalem, where she focused on access and movement issues in Gaza. She has a PhD and MPhil in policy analysis from RAND’s Graduate School, an MA in international relations/international business from New York University, and a BSc in biology (major) and computer science (minor) from Tel Aviv University.
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Starting From the Ground Up:
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Hamas’ October 7 terrorist attack inside of Israel and the subsequent IDF military operation in Gaza have introduced a new challenge into the Israeli-Palestinian sphere. While Israel will have to rethink its security approach and its wider strategy for relations with the Palestinians, there is also the immediate problem of what Gaza will look like when the IDF has concluded its primary military operations. Stabilizing Gaza, resuming necessary services, rebuilding infrastructure, and preventing the return of Hamas—assuming that Israel is successful in removing it from effective power—will require a concerted effort from multiple stakeholders: Israel, the Palestinians, Middle Eastern countries, the international community, and particularly the United States. Failure to come up with a plan guarantees a perpetual crisis for Israel, Palestinians, and the region.

Notwithstanding differences over the kinetic use of force and the military campaign itself, Israel and the international community are aligned in what they do not wish to see in Gaza in the aftermath of the war: neither Hamas rule, nor a vacuum that will lead to chaos, nor prolonged Israeli occupation of the Strip. Furthermore, all parties agree that the prime objective is to turn Gaza from a violent entity to one that is at peace with itself and its neighbors. However, Israel is at odds with the international community on how to fulfill this objective. While the international community ultimately envisages the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza, the Israeli government currently rules out this option, with some officials saying internally “neither Hamas, nor Abbas” (referring to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas).

While Israel’s concerns about the Palestinian Authority are warranted, the absolute veto of this long-term objective is primarily a political strategy that seeks to preserve Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s coalition. Israel can and should build on its existing framework agreement with the PA, concede to interim PA involvement, and seize the opportunity to condition the PA’s eventual return to Gaza on meaningful reforms. Doing so will help Israel not only garner international goodwill, which is desperately needed to complete the military campaign, but also alleviate pressures to provide for the population of Gaza, and strengthen the PA to avoid another front in the West Bank. Despite hopes to the contrary, no other players in the international community are willing to entertain long-term commitments to Gaza, let alone ruling the Strip, leaving the PA as the only viable option. While hard to imagine in the current environment, the return of the PA—with substantial reforms—is the only possible, although not guaranteed, pathway toward peace.

In practice, the vision for the eventual return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza should serve as an ultimate goal, but getting there will be complicated. Before the PA can assume full responsibilities in Gaza, and even prior to empowering a provisional government in Gaza, there must be an interim plan to stabilize Gaza, restore basic services and public security, and begin reconstruction, all while preventing the PA’s collapse and implosion of the West Bank. Taking decisive steps toward implementing these measures will set up the PA for success so that it
can transition into assuming responsibilities in Gaza, and move Palestinian politics forward in order to rebuild legitimacy for a Palestinian governing entity. All of these efforts should be a precursor for leveraging the war toward a durable political process that aims to resolve, or at least meaningfully transform, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel, the Palestinians, and the international community should work closely on all dimensions of planning for the “day after” in Gaza, thinking constructively and realistically about what can be done, when, where, by who, and how. Each dimension will require deep American commitment and involvement in working with and cajoling all relevant parties during the planning phase and the stabilization of Gaza. It is crucial for the U.S. to undertake as much of this process as possible before the fighting in Gaza has concluded in order to be ready immediately for the stabilization phase.

(1) What: the types of responsibilities—administrative and security/public order—that will entail different actors and raise different challenges.

(2) When: the pace of a gradual process, which should be aligned with the stages of the military campaign. The process should begin immediately with a humanitarian surge, continue through a standoff fighting phase, and following the conclusion of the major military campaign lead to an interim stabilization and reconstruction period, and the empowerment of a provisional Palestinian government as a means to fulfill a long-term vision for sustainability.

(3) Where: different responsibilities might need to be administered in different parts of the Strip depending on the progress of the military campaign. For instance, after bifurcating Gaza militarily and completing the IDF campaign in the northern part of the Strip, that area could become a safe zone where services are slowly restored and responsibilities are gradually assumed by different actors, even as things progress differently in the south.

(3) Who: the actors involved, including Palestinians (PA-affiliated players in Gaza and in the West Bank, vetted non-Hamas forces in Gaza, private sector actors, family and clan chiefs, etc.), regional countries (Egypt, Jordan, UAE, Morocco, Bahrain, Saudi, etc.), the international community (key donor countries, the UN and affiliated international organizations, and primarily the United States). Israel is the key player, but ideally its involvement will slowly become less active and be limited to approval and cooperation.

(4) How: Transitioning from the devastating war in Gaza into stability, restoration of services, reconstruction, and governance requires substantial resources, artful diplomacy, ambitious thinking, and commitment to a meaningful and durable political process to accompany and propel forward short- and medium-term steps on the ground and move them in the right direction.
What follows is a notional plan for a coalition of Palestinians, regional states, and international partners to restore public security, provide humanitarian relief, ensure delivery of basic services, and create the political, economic, and security conditions conducive to a permanent PA-led government in Gaza. While each dimension deserves a thorough analysis, the objective of this paper is to outline only the key contours of the plan. The paper assumes an ideal scenario within the realm of what is implementable—eliminating Hamas as a military and governing force in Gaza. An outcome in which Hamas remains in power in Gaza and Israel faces a years-long constant military standoff with the group, or a Palestinian attempt at PA-Hamas unity, should not be discounted; however, it would require different thinking, which is not the focus of this paper.

Key Principles

• Three overarching objectives, which are agreed upon by all relevant parties, should guide the post-war Gaza planning: no Hamas control over Gaza or remaining meaningful military capabilities, no post-Hamas vacuum that will inevitably lead to chaos or anarchy, and no long-term Israeli military occupation over the Strip.

• The Palestinian polity should eventually be united under a single leadership entity, as the Palestinian divide has both failed the Palestinian people and complicated American and Israeli interests. A successful plan for Gaza cannot only address Gaza, but must also incorporate the West Bank and put forth a larger, credible, and durable framework for resolving, or at least meaningfully transforming, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

• Despite its current veto, demonstrated Israeli flexibility regarding the PA's role in Gaza would help Israel stave off international pressure to prematurely end the military campaign; grant legitimacy to Israel's broader objective to eliminate Hamas diplomatically, economically, and militarily through the creation of an anti-Hamas coalition; enlist regional and international help to stabilize the Strip; and respond to international law accusations tying Israel's military presence in Gaza to its responsibility for service provision in the Strip.

• The war has created an opportunity to enlist unprecedented Arab assistance to help stabilize Gaza due to fear of spillover and domestic political ramifications; this will nevertheless require appropriate incentives, guarantees, and a long-term political framework to address Israeli-Palestinian issues.

• No matter the scenario, U.S. leadership is necessary for building international and regional coalitions, overseeing the implementation and monitoring of different arrangements, securing requisite Israeli trust, and rehabilitating and strengthening the PA.
Interim Phase—The first 3-5 years after the primary military campaign

STRUCTURE

Lessons learned from other conflicts suggest a model integrating local and regional/international efforts in both security and civilian affairs, relying on four types of actors: (1) Local Palestinian players; (2) members of a regional and international coalition drawn from states that are most invested the post-conflict situation and are prepared to commit personnel and funds to Gaza for a limited period of time (e.g. Egypt, Jordan, the U.S.); (3) the donor community, working primarily through its network of actors who are already on the ground in Gaza and familiar with the logistics and procedures of operating in the territory; (4) Israel, which will sustain overall security responsibility in the immediate and near-term, but whose critical role in the medium-term is as an enabling partner, which will require assuming some risks and balancing between short- and long-term diverging interests.

The legal regime that authorizes the involvement of regional and international parties is a key question. Theoretically, there are two options—either a mandate or endorsement from the United Nations Security Council, or an agreement by the aforementioned parties, similar to the model of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in Sinai. A U.N. decision is unlikely given the divisions on the Security Council between the U.S. on one side and China and Russia on the other, along with tensions related to the war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, Russia could conceivably seize the opportunity to demonstrate a constructive, peaceful role through a relatively low common denominator. An Israeli-Palestinian agreement under the auspices of the U.N. also seems unlikely in the current political climate, yet under certain conditions Israel could be convinced to agree to a PA request to the U.N. to approve a peacekeeping mission. Finally, the PA—as the internationally recognized governing authority of Gaza—and Israel could enter into an agreement similar in principle to the bilateral U.N.-brokered Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism that was signed in the aftermath of the 2014 conflict. To achieve the latter, a more
comprehensive agreement is likely required that includes the West Bank, and at a minimum fulfills the commitments made at the Sharm and Aqaba summits.

PRIORITIES

The initial priority in the first post-conflict phase is to reinstate law and order, bolster humanitarian assistance, and restore basic services, including but not limited to education, healthcare, and daily commerce. While much focus is placed on the humanitarian aspect, public order is a precondition for large-scale effective basic service provision. Furthermore, absent handing over security control from the IDF to a different entity, there is a concrete risk that Israel's force presence would be interpreted as a military occupation of Gaza, making Israel liable for providing the population's needs, in stark contrast to one of the key guiding principles of the war. In addition, as recent American experience demonstrates, any long-term Israeli military occupation is certain to lead to a counter-insurgency, which will put any stabilization program at risk and make fulfilling a political vision for Gaza's future impossible.

Public Security and Law and Order

The post-war security dilemma reflects Israel's general approach to the Palestinian issue and Gaza in particular, with tension between an Israeli desire to disengage on one hand, and control the territory and people on the other. Planning needs to account for this tension and allow for calculated risk management. Irrespective of current Israeli government rhetoric, Israeli leaders will not want to entangle the IDF in an open-ended occupation of Gaza beyond the confines of a buffer zone along the northern and eastern borders, which will create opportunities to phase in other forces as the IDF assesses its hierarchy of dangers and acceptable alternatives.

While the ultimate objective should be to have the Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF) fully take over security duties in Gaza and draw on local Gazans, it is not capable of fully stepping in immediately given its responsibilities in the West Bank, the political difficulties of entering on the heels of the IDF, and the need to scale up. Therefore a concerted effort is needed early on to identify candidates for the PASF mission in Gaza, begin recruitment and security vetting, and design training schemes. Rather than waiting for a full force to be ready, initial deployment can be gradual with initially only limited tasks. Here, two types of missions could set the stage for greater responsibility. First, civil defense (currently, an unarmed force of 1,000 men who work closely with Israel and other international partners) for clearing up rubble and ammunition and offering a disaster response, as part of the recovery and planned reconstruction stages. Second, Palestinian border and customs police to man the Gaza side of crossings, whether with Egypt or Israel, once Hamas is pushed out.

The PASF in Gaza should be supported by an international gendarmerie and peacekeeping contingent that operates under one of the possible types of mandates for a pre-determined benchmarked limited period. Israel is understandably skeptical regarding U.N. peacekeeping forces, based on the unsuccessful example of UNIFIL in Southern Lebanon, yet there are successful precedents, such as the KFOR in Kosovo and INTERFET in East Timor, which were key to restoring peace and offer valuable
lessons in terms of the right numbers, resources, and authorities.\textsuperscript{1} Theoretically, under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter, peacekeepers can engage in military operations, yet the force in Gaza would not initially replace Israel in ensuring that no external security threat emanates from the territory, but rather support a provisional government, monitor the security situation, and assist in public security tasks (rather than a full military mission). Based on a positive track record and after building trust between all sides, the multinational force could assume gradual responsibility, both functionally and geographically, as part of a phased Israeli withdrawal with careful coordination between the IDF and the force.

The international force would ideally come from Egypt, Jordan, and potentially the Abraham Accords states (Morocco, UAE, Bahrain) and Saudi Arabia. While Arab countries may wish to refrain from having boots on the ground in Gaza, they may also be open to steps previously unimagined to secure their own interests; Egypt and Jordan need to ensure that Gaza is stable immediately upon Hamas’ removal, whereas other regional states can leverage involvement in post-conflict Gaza stabilization for domestic prestige and influence within Palestinian politics and a future leadership transition. Given a choice between an overwhelmed Palestinian security force on day one that is likely to fall to Hamas remnants or counter-insurgent militias, or serving alongside an international U.N. force in an effort to stabilize Gaza, regional states can—with the right set of incentives (from the United States) and guarantees that this assignment would be temporary with a set deadline—take on limited activities that they would not have previously contemplated.

The U.S. should take the lead in creating and training a Palestinian security force under the auspices of the United States Security Coordinator (USSC), with the full support of the NATO states that already contribute to the USSC Mission. The USSC’s experience in coordinating between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, its current train-and-equip activities, and its successful track record of integrating NATO expertise into the local environment make it the ideal actor to develop an interim Gaza security force. USSC leadership will also be critical in order to get Israeli buy-in and to avoid permanent routine IDF incursions into Gaza akin to the situation that currently exists in Area A. USSC teams could even serve as peace monitors alongside a U.N.-authorized force, reassuring Israeli and international partners. To be able to do so, however, the USSC would need a clear mandate and appropriate resources, towards which the Biden administration and Congress should continue to work.

One of the key challenges here is Israel’s insistence on freedom of action in Gaza, as reflected in Prime Minister Netanyahu’s ABC interview on November 7 in which he said that in any scenario, Israel would maintain security responsibility over Gaza. What this means precisely is unclear and could encompass a range of possibilities, from a standing IDF presence inside Gaza to daily incursions and raids across the border line. A pan-Arab force is unlikely to accept Israeli incursions into areas of its

\textsuperscript{1} E.g., Nir Arielli, Jacob Stoil, and Mary Elizabeth Walters, The Case for Sending a Multinational Force to Gaza, Mitvim, November 2023 https://mitvim.org.il/en/publication/the-case-for-sending-a-multinational-force-to-gaza/
responsibility akin to what has become routine in Area A in the West Bank, let alone an arrangement similar to Area B where Israel retains full security control. To address the understandable Israeli demand for security control in light of what transpired on October 7, all interim forces—whether Palestinian, pan-Arab, or international—should phase in as the IDF phases out, gradually assuming security responsibilities, both territorially and functionally. The turnover from the IDF can begin with a limited area as a pilot, while the IDF is present in other parts, securing the area from the outside.

**Humanitarian Relief and Basic Services**

The humanitarian toll in Gaza is immense. Most of the population is on the move and facing immediate risks to their lives, without basic access to shelter, sufficient potable water, sanitation, food, and health services, let alone protection and education. In order to ensure an efficient and comprehensive flow and dispersion of necessary humanitarian assistance, a thorough analysis is needed to examine all bottlenecks: funding, aligning needs with support, security, logistics, coordination, and uptake by beneficiaries. For a more streamlined process, Israel and the UN should mend their ties and improve coordination. Israel should open its crossings to Gaza, alleviating some of the burden on Egypt. In the interim, until infrastructure is repaired and reconstruction is complete, Israel should resume pre-war provision of water and power supply to Gaza, all while facilitating other technical solutions that would allow for disengagement from the Strip.

Judging by events thus far as the war has progressed, humanitarian relief and service provision in the immediate term falls, and during the interim phase will continue to fall, primarily to the U.N., and particularly UNRWA, which is the main local actor capable of doing so in a comprehensive manner. While there are strong inclinations to either collapse UNRWA or replace it with another existing body, there is no other existing actor with the position or ability to take over its functions. This inconvenient situation will correspondingly entail increasing financial support for UNRWA and could expand its mandate beyond the Gaza refugee population.

At the same time, although UNRWA is irreplaceable in the short-term, the war has compounded the legitimate concerns about the agency, with reports that Israeli hostages were held captive by UNRWA employees and went untreated by UNRWA medical personnel. As a result, all reliance on UNRWA requires comprehensive oversight mechanisms, limiting the scope of its activities, reducing the dependency on UNRWA by diversifying service provision to different entities whenever possible (international organizations, NGOs, national aid agencies, and private sector actors), and diluting its influence and power. Counterintuitively to its oversized role in Gaza, UNRWA's problematic record and clear ties with Hamas create an opportunity for much-needed reforms. While there is a big focus in Israel and in Congress on UNRWA's textbooks, top priority should be given to depoliticizing the agency and ensuring that the assistance that it provides is need-based rather than linked to political status. Additionally, there is an opportunity to eliminate UNRWA's exclusive definition of Palestinian refugeehood and align it with the global definition, which will
not eliminate Palestinian refugee status wholesale but will address a significant source of controversy surrounding the agency.

Any temporary mandate and multi-year resource surge for UNRWA to provide broader services should be time bound and conditioned on significant reforms. At the end of the predefined interim phase, UNRWA's parastatal responsibilities should be transferred wholesale to the Palestinian government that assumes power.

The Palestinian Authority should also be integrated into providing services in a limited fashion from the start, with more PA involvement phased in over time. In fact, the PA is already present in Gaza, employing some thousands of workers. Additionally, tens of thousands continue to receive salaries despite not working. The PA's presence in Gaza extends to various government authorities, including water and monetary affairs. PA water authority employees in Gaza have fixed and extended water pipes in full coordination with Israel several times since the beginning of the war, and there is potential for greater technical support. Fatah also maintains a political presence, and monthly budget transfers of approximately $123 million to Gaza are ongoing. The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism involves the PA as an equal partner in vetting private sector actors, projects, and the importation of goods.

There are various ways to gradually involve the PA in the humanitarian effort, and likely without violating any Israeli redlines. For instance, medical teams from the West Bank can augment those in Gaza for a limited period of time, ideally as part of a UN or NGO delegation or a foreign-sponsored field hospital. The PA and the UN can launch a program for an emergency vaccination campaign to reduce the spread of infectious diseases such as hepatitis, and combat surging intestinal and skin infections in Gaza, all of which endanger Israeli public health as well. Another campaign could be systematically testing water sources for chemical and biological pollutants to prevent an outbreak of a waterborne pandemic, such as cholera. The PA can send its own humanitarian aid into Gaza or call for others to do so, which would allow faster security clearing and could provide some income to the PA through security, customs, and transport fees.

Gradually, as briefly mentioned above, the PA's Civil Defense force can be deployed to clear disaster areas, removing rubble and ammunition in order to prepare the ground for temporary facilities and eventually reconstruction. In addition, the PA's border police and customs services should return to the Gaza border crossings under external third-party (American or European) supervision, similar to the 2005 agreement, which was brokered by the Bush administration and launched by the European Union Border Assistance Mission for the Rafah Crossing Point. This will create a foundation for greater PA involvement going forward and pave the way for the PA's eventual full resumption of administrative responsibilities in Gaza. It will also give the PA a boost in credibility and popularity by allowing it to take credit for helping better Palestinian lives without being seen as an enabler of Israeli occupation policies.
Provisional Administration

Any interim phase that attempts to avoid the PA entirely is bound to create more complications than it solves. The U.S. and Arab states have stressed PA involvement and a plan that aims to restore the PA to Gaza as either strong preferences or prerequisites for their own involvement in a reconstruction and rehabilitation process in Gaza. The only way for Israel to avoid having to own the post-war Gaza mess on its own is to integrate the PA in a way that satisfies Israeli security concerns. Attempts to veto any and all PA involvement due to Israeli domestic political calculations will leave Israel with an unsustainable burden in Gaza and risk an environment of total anarchy or an environment conducive to Hamas’ immediate resurrection as Gaza's ruling entity.

In order to manage service provision and reconstruction, a provisional technocratic government—ideally under a U.N. mandate—should be appointed to oversee Gaza during this interim period. This government should be drawn from local Palestinians, including the PA employees who remained in Gaza following Hamas’ takeover in 2007, non-Hamas vetted public servants, members of the Palestinian Affairs Civil Committee, and others. The clear message from regional states is that any process in Gaza must be led by Palestinians, and without a Palestinian provisional government and some modicum of PA involvement, Arab states will not step in to provide governance, reconstruction assistance, or security. This provisional government will not oversee a political process or move toward elections, but will provide administrative oversight and technical support during the interim phase. There is an argument for a provisional government to be comprised entirely of Palestinians, but it would be wiser to include experts and bureaucrats from other states to the extent possible. Doing so has the advantage of giving external actors a greater stake—and thus greater buy-in—in the reconstruction process, in addition to facilitating cooperation between Israel and regional states with an eye toward accelerating the pace toward and deepening the quality of normalization.

In parallel to the provisional government in Gaza, the PA should be “revitalized,” in President Biden’s words, i.e., undergo substantial reforms in all areas: economics, security, and governance, as detailed below.

At the end of the interim phase, the provisional government should hand its powers and duties to the PA, which should also be inclusive of local Gaza elements, while the interim security force should turn over its responsibilities to the PASF. Once this handover occurs, there should be a 1-2 year period in which PA performance is assessed, at which point Palestinian elections should be held in the West Bank and Gaza.

Political Process

In a sense, Hamas’ brutal attack on Israel and the war that followed have at least internationally brought the PA back to life, treating it no longer as part of Gaza’s problem but rather as part of the solution. For the PA to actually be part of any viable and lasting solution,
however, the interim administrative and security phase in Gaza must coincide with a process to shift Israeli policy in the West Bank and consequently rebuild PA credibility. Without a wider Israeli shift toward Palestinian issues, any plan for Gaza is ultimately bound to fail. Securing personnel and monetary contributions from states in the region will be unlikely, and Hamas’ ideology and approach will only gain more popularity, even if the group itself is largely eliminated from Gaza. A reconstruction and stabilization effort in Gaza should be twinned with a reconstruction and stabilization effort aimed at the PA.

The steps that Israel should take in the West Bank are ones that the U.S. has been pushing as part of the Sharm el-Sheikh process and as part of a program to strengthen the PA. These include redesignations of approximately 10% of Area C as Area A, and redesignating all of Area B as Area A; curtailing to the extent possible IDF incursions into Palestinian cities in Area A; freezing new construction or further approvals of construction plans in areas beyond those identified in Israel Policy Forum’s An Unsettled Question report; freezing demolitions and evictions of Palestinians in Area C and East Jerusalem for permitting violations; and fully transferring all tax revenues to the PA collected by Israel consistent with current Israeli law.

The PA must carry out reforms as well. President Biden’s welcome call for a “revitalized PA” needs to be translated into clear objectives, a roadmap for achieving them, and key performance indicators. “Revitalization” means different things to different actors, but clearly significant reforms are necessary if the PA is to become an effective government that provides services to its people, establishes its legitimacy and credibility among Palestinians, and builds trust within the international community. Chief among these is ending its prisoner and martyr payments system and replacing it with a need-based welfare system. Additionally, reforms should incorporate basic financial transparency and accountability, independence of the judicial system, security sector reorganization, and ending state harassment of civil society and media organizations. To achieve full Israeli buy-in, Jerusalem’s prime concerns should also be addressed in the reforms, including stopping incitement under the verification of a third-party mechanism and refraining from appealing to the ICC or other international bodies in an effort to internationalize the conflict or achieve de facto statehood without direct engagement with Israel.

There should also be a benchmarked and implementable timetable for Palestinian elections following the return of the PA to Gaza. Palestinian political legitimacy will only ultimately result from democratic elections, and Hamas’ removal as a viable actor resolves the key obstacle to holding elections. These should not take place during a transitional period, but should follow this longer political process.

U.S. Role

None of what is outlined above can take place without a leading U.S. role. The U.S. is the only party that can organize and oversee this set of complex arrangements and diplomacy.

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A leading U.S. role is also vital in order to secure Israeli trust and buy-in, particularly in the realm of security arrangements where Israeli instincts and preferences will be to carve out a permanent security zone inside Gaza. Even if an Israeli buffer zone inside Gaza is the price of ending full-scale military operations, American involvement will help in minimizing IDF presence inside of Gaza, and avoiding an open-ended, full Israeli occupation, which will serve nobody’s interests. In both the humanitarian domain and subsequent recovery and reconstruction phases that should follow, the U.S. will be indispensable. Accordingly, the U.S. should undertake the following actions:

- Immediately convene a regional conference that includes Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and European Union countries to secure agreement on a structure for a Gaza provisional government. This should ideally be followed by the creation of an international body involving some combination of the aforementioned states that can implement and monitor an agreement.

- Ramp up support—funding, personnel, and political backing—to the USSC in order to build and train a Gaza interim security force and to ensure that existing USSC efforts in the West Bank are fully supported so as not to risk greater instability in areas currently under the auspices of the PA.

- Increase humanitarian assistance to Gaza, and work with the UN, Israel, the PA, and Egypt to create more mechanisms for the delivery of this assistance; these can include additional crossing points, offshore medical facilities, and humanitarian airdrops.

- Create a list of specific benchmarks for a PA reform roadmap, and create an ad-hoc coalition to monitor enforcement based on the Quartet.

- Use all available influence and leverage with Israel to secure the policy changes recommended above in the West Bank.

- Couple the requests for political concessions from Israel with a broad coalitional effort to crack down on Iranian financing of terrorism, support for Hamas and other proxies, and efforts to destabilize other American partners in the region.

Worst-Case Scenario

The possibility remains that little of what is laid out above will be implementable. In this scenario, Israel will be unsuccessful in rooting Hamas out of its position in Gaza. Israel’s operation in northern Gaza prior to the temporary pauses for hostage releases did not eradicate Hamas from the territory, even if it removed its monopoly on control. The current phase of Israel’s operation focuses on the southern part of the Strip, and is fated to be even more complicated due to building international pressure in the face of high Palestinian casualties and a growing refugee and humanitarian crisis. Israel may also face a more difficult tactical environment, with more Hamas fighters and more civilians packed into a
smaller space. If Israel cuts off its military operation earlier than it would prefer due to external considerations or is met with greater resistance than expected, it may withdraw before having fulfilled its ambitious military objectives. Such a scenario would leave Hamas with military and governing capabilities in Gaza, potentially prompting Israel to either refrain from withdrawal or launch constant special force operations, raids, and airstrikes in the territory. If Hamas is not removed from governing Gaza, there may also be pressure for the PA to enter a unity agreement with Hamas, particularly if doing so is perceived as presenting a stronger front in the face of Israeli operations that appear to be a renewed occupation of Gaza. This, in turn, would forestall any international coalition assuming responsibilities in Gaza or U.S. support for the return of the PA.

If this becomes the new equilibrium in Gaza, there will still be a need for U.S. leadership and opportunities for regional cooperation, but they will be slow to materialize and difficult to operationalize. There are approximately 1.8 million Palestinians now south of Wadi Gaza, and international efforts will have to focus on service provision and reconstruction without planning for the larger political future of the territory. If Israeli control and presence are more robust in northern Gaza, every effort will need to be made to wall off the northern part of the strip from the southern end. In conjunction with this, there will have to be a stricter border control regime at Rafah to ensure that Hamas personnel are not entering southern Gaza from Egypt, while the Kerem Shalom crossing for goods in southern Gaza should ramp up its activities in order to serve southern Gaza. Israel will also face profound challenges in maintaining a modicum of international support—and most pressingly, continued U.S. support—while it militarily occupies parts of Gaza.

If Hamas remains in control of Gaza, the political stalemate between Israel and the Palestinians is fated to continue. No Israeli leader will enter a serious political process with Palestinian leadership if it means accepting a Hamas role in Palestinian governance, and the challenges of negotiating a permanent status agreement while the Palestinian polity is divided will remain acute. Palestinian politics will continue to be hampered by the Fatah-Hamas divide, which has impacted everything from governance to economics to thinking about a leadership transition.

U.S. policy will also continue to be frustrated by dealing with multiple entities across different Palestinian territories. No American initiative—whether it be two states, one state, or something in between—can accommodate over two million Palestinians being governed by a U.S.-designated terrorist organization. The challenges that have built up since Hamas’ takeover of Gaza in 2007 of supporting Israeli security while navigating the humanitarian imperatives in Gaza and the regional politics of inevitable rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas will only worsen. Planning and coordinating a post-Hamas scenario in Gaza is difficult enough, but U.S. thinking must be guided first and foremost by getting to the transitional stage rather than assuming that it will inevitably happen.

Conclusion

Despite the battle in Gaza not being over, the political battle lines for the day after are being drawn. The U.S. and all relevant external stakeholders have expressed their desire to see the Palestinian Authority have the primary long-term role of running Gaza. Prime Minister
Netanyahu’s government, however, has wavered between ruling it out categorically and ruling it out in practice. Netanyahu’s veto of a PA role is aimed at satisfying his political base and his coalition partners, and while this presents obvious hurdles in the short term, U.S. planning cannot and should not accept this as an inviolable Israeli red line. The sands of Netanyahu’s political fate are running out, and the goal of stabilizing Gaza requires a viable and strengthened PA. The October 7 tragedy and crisis also creates the conditions for an international coalition to insist upon long-overdue PA reforms. Thus, restoring the PA to Gaza should not be seen as a necessary but unpleasant conclusion, but as a rare opportunity.

If the U.S. and Israel can work together in a coordinated and meaningful way, Hamas can be marginalized, the PA can be built up as a viable alternative that Palestinians can embrace, and Israel can achieve significant PA reforms that it has long wanted to see. Beginning this political process now will also alleviate pressure on Israel and allow it to better prosecute the military campaign against Hamas while guarding against the West Bank tipping into anarchy. There should be no illusions about the difficulty of such a process, or about the myriad pitfalls that abound in any push to solve the Gaza problem. Any successful effort must begin immediately, and the U.S. should expend as much time and capital in trying to get this right and move all parties to where they need to be as it has devoted in the past to the wider Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The Biden administration took office with the intent of avoiding a proactive approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, believing that it was not solvable but could be managed. The pitfalls of being only reactive and assuming that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is manageable became starkly clear on October 7, undermining U.S. security interests in the Middle East and worldwide. The U.S. can no longer assume that the problems are not of a magnitude that require intensive attention. U.S. leadership at this moment is both critical and necessary.