How to Ensure That There Is No Day After

Netanyahu’s purported plan for Gaza’s day after would leave Gaza in suspended animation. It is a vision for an indefinite Israeli occupation that leaves Israel with the entire cost of governing 2.3 million Palestinians.

By Michael J. Koplow
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When Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu issued a one-page-plus-one-paragraph document encompassing his plan for what should happen next in Gaza, it was following months of criticism that he had turned into Dr. No with regards to Gaza’s day after. Netanyahu had consistently voiced his opposition to various things—no Hamas, no Palestinian Authority, no UNRWA, no porous border with Egypt, no timetable for a return of displaced Palestinians to northern Gaza—but had not put forward any alternative plans for what should happen. If there is one thing that is clear following the release of Netanyahu’s vision, it is that he has evidently been too busy with other things over the past months to come up with something resembling a real plan for when the fighting in Gaza is over.

Netanyahu’s document, titled “The Day After Hamas,” is divided into immediate-, medium-, and long-term sections, and if there is anything that unites them, it is that they are light on details but have a coherent thread of creating an unmanageable burden for Israel. This is evident from the opening section on the immediate term, which consists of only one sentence and states that the IDF will continue fighting until it has achieved its goals of destroying Hamas and Islamic Jihad’s military and governing capabilities, gotten Israel’s hostages returned, and removed the security threat from Gaza. While these are all important and worthy goals, labeling them as immediate-term is a gross misnomer, as the first and last will take more time and require an indefinite commitment that cannot be reasonably dubbed as immediate. Notably absent is any plan for improving humanitarian assistance provision or moving Palestinian civilians out of Rafah, both of which should be immediate imperatives if Israel is to successfully move to any medium-term plans.

The medium-term section is the crux of the document, as this is where Netanyahu’s lack of planning or strategic preparation comes through the clearest. The security vision is
unsurprising and tracks with Israeli government positions that have been consistent since October 7: indefinite IDF freedom of action in Gaza to neutralize threats, creation of a buffer zone that will last indefinitely, a complete closure on the Gaza-Egypt border, and security control in all areas west of the Jordan River. The problem is that some of these require cooperation with other parties, which is unlikely to be forthcoming without some Israeli concessions. The border closure with Egypt, for instance, mentions that it will ideally require buy-in from and the help of Egypt and the U.S., both of whom will have objections and who have not demonstrated any willingness yet to go along with this plan. More worrisome, the security requirements have no benchmarks or even clear goals, but are instead open-ended, which makes sense given the ambiguity surrounding what Gaza will look like once the war has ended but also lays the foundation for an indefinite Israeli military occupation of Gaza.

While the security vision is understandable and even implementable despite the high burden it creates for Israel, the civilian vision is where things go off the rails. Netanyahu’s plan calls for Gaza to be run by “local officials with administrative experience,” and who are not tied to states or bodies that support terrorism and do not receive payment from them. How Israel is supposed to identify these officials, convince them to run Gaza, pay them to serve as the local government, and give them the resources they would need to pull this off is left unsaid. The document also calls for UNRWA to be shuttered—understandable in light of the revelations about UNRWA employees’ ties to Hamas—and be replaced with other aid organizations. It does not, however, say how Israel will overcome the reluctance of other aid organizations—such as the World Food Programme, which recently suspended its operations in Gaza due to concerns over the dangers its employees are subjected to—to assume the burden once UNRWA is gone. In the part that is the most aspirational if being charitable and the most delusional if not, the plan calls for reconstruction to begin after Gaza has been fully demilitarized and an anti-radicalization plan has been implemented and that it should be done with “financing and leadership of countries acceptable to Israel.” In other words, Israel will do what it has to do militarily, and then it expects the Gulf states to come in, do the hard work, and pick up the check, all without one nod toward the requirements that the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and others have publicly laid out about a Palestinian Authority role and progress toward a two-state outcome.

The long-term section does not contain anything new, but reiterates Netanyahu’s clear opposition to unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state, viewing such a move as a reward for the terrorism of October 7, and says that any political agreement with the Palestinians will only come about through negotiations.
What Netanyahu’s plan ultimately boils down to is a recipe for Israel to take the disaster and tragedy of October 7 and maintain a different type of disaster without a conceivable exit. An indefinite Israeli military presence with no details on what would lead it to end, an effort to identify local warlords and empower them in Gaza with no central governing infrastructure, and a hope that wealthy Arab states will fund Gaza’s reconstruction without any political benefit for them in return is a combination that actually means an Israeli occupation with no end in sight. Israel will have to provide security on its own, run Palestinian affairs in Gaza on its own, rebuild Gaza on its own, and provide for the needs of 2.3 million Palestinians on its own. The financial burdens will be crippling and it will require tens of thousands of additional IDF soldiers, all in the midst of a Gaza counterinsurgency, a shaky Israeli economy, and an international community that wants nothing to do with any of it. If someone were trying to keep Israel mired in quicksand, it would be difficult to come up with a better way in which to do it.

Israel does not have to agree with the U.S. or Arab states, let alone with the Palestinians, on what should happen in Gaza once the war has concluded. It is right to push back on efforts to impose a political solution that would throw out the formula of negotiations between the two sides. Israel will need to give on some things while holding firm on others, but it shouldn’t be expected to accede to everything that the U.S. or any outside actor envisions. Like all messy situations, the solution to cleaning it up will be messy too. But the ostensible plan that Netanyahu has laid out is one that takes what he is pushing against and creates the mirror-image version that is supposed to work on Israel’s behalf. Israel will determine what happens without any outside input or Israel concessions, and then everyone else will rush in to comply with Israeli dictates. It is difficult to imagine that anyone believes it will actually work this way other than Netanyahu, but he has laid down a public gauntlet that will be hard to walk back. If Netanyahu was trying to create facts on the ground for the day after, instead he made it more likely that the day after never comes.

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