

Israel's War Aims and the Principles of a Post-Hamas Administration in Gaza

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#), [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#), [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

Oct 17, 2023

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

Robert Satloff is the Segal Executive Director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis

It's not too early to think about the “day after” the war—even preliminary planning to create an interim administration will help clarify objectives for Israel's leaders, sustain U.S. support, provide a more positive alternative future for Palestinians, and give Arab allies a rationale to play a more constructive role.

In describing the aims of Israel's war against an organization that perpetrated the worst mass murder of Jews since the Holocaust, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu declared, “We will crush and destroy Hamas.” Precisely what that means in practice, however, is not clear.

Prominent Israeli voices—ministers, officials, and generals past and present—have offered a range of potential objectives, from disarming Hamas and stripping it of the capability to ever mount such an attack again, to retaking the Gaza Strip nearly two decades after ceding it to Palestinian control. Some current officials (such as Intelligence

Minister Gila Gamliel) have said it is too early even to define these goals, noting that this should be done only after battlefield victory. But it is difficult to see how Israel will know it has achieved victory without defining it in advance and preparing for the day after.

True, Israel's desired outcome may be forcibly scaled back by the unpredictability of war, following the adage that no military plan survives contact with the enemy. Yet it still makes sense to define an outcome now and begin planning for it even if circumstances may force change along the way. Having a clear, feasible objective will dull the critique that this war is intended solely as retribution for Hamas's barbaric attack; it will also provide a banner around which Israel's allies can advocate its cause, and an umbrella under which vulnerable Arab peace partners can wait out the fighting.

General Principles

Israel's most logical objective is to end Hamas control of Gaza, since only that outcome will prevent the group's leaders from rising out of the rubble of war to declare victory just by surviving Israel's bruising might. Other outcomes are unlikely to meet Jerusalem's three most critical needs:

1. To guarantee Hamas cannot launch attacks in the future.
2. To restore Israelis' confidence that their government and army can provide for their security.
3. To reestablish Israel's deterrent power in the eyes of friends and adversaries around the Middle East.

Ending Hamas rule does not mean eliminating every Hamas supporter or every sign of the group's influence. But it is a big goal, especially given two formidable complications on the ground—namely, Hamas and other groups are holding approximately 200 hostages, and ending Hamas rule would require enormous military effort throughout Gaza over an extended period, both on the surface and against the group's vaunted, booby-trapped tunnel system.

In a war with a goal so defined, victory will not be swift or easy. America's role will be threefold:

1. To help Israel achieve that objective at the lowest possible cost of injury to Palestinian civilians.
2. To deter Israel's other enemies so it can focus on achieving success as quickly as possible.
3. To help Israelis and Palestinians start planning now for the governance vacuum that would result from ending Hamas rule, so that destabilizing actors do not fill the void.

Given these needs and objectives, the following general principles should govern planning for the postwar situation:

From a U.S. perspective, Israel should leave Gaza as soon as the military task is complete and avoid

reoccupying the area. At the same time, it would be a mistake for Israel to destroy Hamas and then leave Gaza as an ungoverned space without a clear sense of what comes next. With help from other actors, Washington has a unique role to play in ensuring that a plan is ready to be implemented once the IDF withdraws, such that Israel is confident about what will fill the vacuum of its departure.

The ultimate goal should be for the Palestinian Authority to return as Gaza's legitimate government. Yet the PA lacks the will and ability to do that job in the foreseeable future—it does not want to be seen as reentering the Strip on the backs of Israeli tanks, and it is not in any shape to take on additional governmental responsibilities in Gaza given its failings in the West Bank.

Therefore, the situation demands the establishment of an interim administration to run Gaza until the PA is able to assume that role. The duration of this interim period depends on meaningful, substantive PA reform, without which neither local Palestinians nor international donors would have confidence in the PA's ability to extend its authority to Gaza. Such reform would also have the crucial benefit of boosting the PA's legitimacy in the West Bank.

Contours of an Interim Administration

A proposed Gaza Interim Administration (GIA) should have three main components: (1) a civilian administration, (2) a public safety/law enforcement apparatus in which Arab state contingents play a central role, and (3) an international coalition for reconstruction and development.

The civilian administration of post-Hamas Gaza should be led and run by Palestinians. Under the leadership of a Palestinian “Chief Administrator,” the departments of a fully functioning local government—health, education, transportation, judiciary, social welfare, etc.—would be run by a mix of technocrats from Gaza, the West Bank, and the Palestinian diaspora, as well as significant local personalities from Gaza towns and clans. During the tumultuous interim period, the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) could continue to provide existing food, health, and education services—no more and no less than in the past. Its long-term status could be reviewed in the context of the PA’s eventual return to the area.

Public safety and law enforcement could be directed by a consortium of the five Arab states who have reached peace agreements with Israel—Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco. Only those Arab states would have Israel’s confidence, which is essential for this effort to succeed. Special care should be taken to ensure that this is not viewed as an “occupation force,” which both the contributing nations and local Palestinians would reject. Instead, it should be presented and structured as a “public safety force.” To that end, contributing states should send police or gendarmerie detachments, not regular military units. Moreover, the force should be commanded by an officer from a country that has no territorial connection to Palestinian areas, such as Morocco. Liaison offices could then be established with the Israeli and Egyptian militaries, the latter of which would have a special role reflecting Cairo’s unique status as Gaza’s direct Arab neighbor. These offices would provide a forum for cooperation on border issues and the flow of goods and people.

International donors, UN and other international aid agencies, and international NGOs would work with the Gaza civil administration under the umbrella of a new agency responsible for repair, reconstruction, and development. This should be an Arab-run effort, perhaps chaired by the UAE, which is a peace partner with Israel, holds the financial resources to be a substantial donor, and has the global reputation and professional acumen to manage such an operation. This agency would oversee the immediate repair and reconstruction of utilities and other public works, as well as identify major projects, raise funds for them, and execute major project development. Billions of dollars would be needed for projects such as creating a new Gaza port and building new industrial zones to provide employment options. (Israel is unlikely to readmit Gazan workers anytime soon after some apparently played a role in the October 7 Hamas assault, either directly or by providing intelligence for the attackers.) Saudi participation in the repair/reconstruction effort would also be important for the plan’s overall success, and could be framed as part of Riyadh’s commitment to reopen a path to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

Although Arab administrators, officers, and officials—including Palestinians—should take the lead in all these efforts, there is also a vital role to play for the United States and other supporters of a peaceful, constructive, hopeful future for Palestinians. Numerous actors—from European partners to specialized UN agencies—will be at the table, but **only America can mobilize and organize this effort and ensure that all its elements are implemented.** Part of the U.S. role is financial; part is lending expertise to the processes of administration and reconstruction; part is ensuring smooth relations between Israel and the three legs of the GIA; and part is providing international legitimacy for the entire effort.

Regarding legitimacy, the best option would be to secure a UN Security Council mandate for this plan, though Russia and China would likely aim to complicate such efforts. The Security Council could also empower the Arab League to authorize this plan as an intermediate actor, but there too, actors such as Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, and Tunisia may get in the way. Alternatively, this effort could be placed within the mandate of the UN Special

Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, which may not require further Security Council action.

Ultimately, however, it might be necessary to build the GIA as a coalition of the willing. If it has strong support from major international actors and backing from the most influential Arab states, the initiative will have a reasonable chance to move forward.

Throughout, a necessary but sensitive issue will be ongoing liaison between the GIA and Israel. In a world where Hamas is no longer a political or military force in Gaza, Israel should be willing to allow the seaport and Egyptian land border to operate with a much less intrusive inspection system for the movement of goods and services. After all, the blockade that Israel sustained to varying degrees over the years did not prevent the group from acquiring what it needed to mount the terrible attacks of October 7—rather, it produced enormous public ill will and opportunities for corruption. Still, Israel has a critical role to play at least early in the transition, when it can help with electricity provision, fuel, and the transit of goods—recognizing that the long-term goal should be for Gaza to provide these goods itself.

Intimate liaison with the GIA’s civil governance, public safety, and reconstruction legs is essential to giving Israel confidence that the new system will not allow the reemergence of Hamas or the growth of another, potentially even more radical movement. At the same time, Israel would need to retain as much of an over-the-horizon presence as possible given that the IDF will have just operated in virtually every corner of the Strip rooting out Hamas.

The GIA should also have an organic link to the PA, even though it will operate independently within the framework described here. The GIA’s initial mandate could spell out a limited duration—say, three years—after which its operation should be open for renewal and linked directly to the process of PA reform. Two colliding principles are at work here: that “nothing is as permanent as the temporary” and that “it is better to get it right than to get it over.” The United States and other major actors will be responsible for finding the right balance in this regard.

Conclusion

These principles are not carved in stone. Rather, they should be viewed as springboards for serious discussion of governance in post-Hamas Gaza, and as ideas that will almost certainly morph in different directions with input from various international and Middle East actors and under the impact of events on the ground. With Israel poised to begin ground operations in Gaza, some may believe it is premature to focus on postwar architecture. Yet now is precisely the right moment to begin this exercise so that a well-crafted plan is ready once military operations transition to political outcomes. If key actors wait for the battlefield fog to clear before engaging on these issues, it may be too late.

Robert Satloff is the Segal Executive Director at The Washington Institute. Dennis Ross, the Institute’s counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow, formerly served as U.S. point man on the Israel-Palestinian peace process. David Makovsky, the Institute’s Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and director of its Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations, formerly served as senior advisor to the State Department’s special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Addressing Iraq's Environmental Challenges: Population Growth

Oct 17, 2023



Khaled Sulaiman

(/policy-analysis/addressing-iraqs-environmental-challenges-population-growth)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Will Hezbollah and Iran Expand War to Israel's North?

Oct 17, 2023



Yair Golan,
Hanin Ghaddar,
David Schenker,
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/will-hezbollah-and-iran-expand-war-israels-north)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The Israel-Hamas War and U.S. Policy: An Update

Oct 16, 2023



David Makovsky,
Zohar Palti,
Grant Rumley,
Neomi Neumann,
Ghaith al-Omari

(/policy-analysis/israel-hamas-war-and-us-policy-update)

TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-
process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-
states)

Israel (/policy-
analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-
analysis/palestinians)