

How to End the War in Gaza: Lessons from Lebanon

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Articles & Testimony

The Lebanon deal shows how Washington and Israel can use their newly gained leverage to resolve the Palestinian crisis.

The cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah brokered by President Joe Biden's envoy Amos Hochstein is an important achievement. It reflects the lessons that the two of us have learned in a lifetime of diplomacy and statecraft—and those lessons can be applied to Gaza and the broader Middle East by the Biden administration in its remaining days and by the incoming Trump administration.

The first lesson is the crucial importance of backing diplomacy with decisive military power and accurate intelligence in order to secure an achievable political objective. As the United States painfully learned in the Iraq War and in Afghanistan, the use of military force divorced from an achievable political outcome is doomed to fail. Force is a tool, not an end in itself.

Israel's use of force set the stage for diplomacy by dramatically weakening Hezbollah. After accepting Hezbollah's imposition of a limited war for nearly a year, the Israel Defense Forces and Mossad acted decisively to decapitate Hezbollah's leadership; disrupt its command, control, and communications; destroy 80 percent of its rocket forces; and dismantle its weapons stocks and infrastructure—below- and aboveground—that it had built up along Israel's borders. Israel also retaliated against Iran after its October 1 ballistic-missile attack on Israel, destroying Iran's strategic air and missile defense and 90 percent of its ballistic-missile-production capability. In doing so, it

reminded us once again of Henry Kissinger's maxim that you can achieve at the negotiating table only what you have won on the battlefield.

A related lesson of good statecraft is recognizing opportunities and moving quickly to act on them. Timing matters, and the Biden administration recognized that Israel's military achievements had created an opening to mediate a cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah, working through the Lebanese government. The administration also believed Iran recognized that Hezbollah's weakness made it vulnerable to its adversaries in Lebanon and that Iran, not wanting to lose the crown jewel of its Axis of Resistance, would want to end the war.

Diplomacy also requires good timing. The conflict was not ripe for settlement until Hezbollah and Iran had been sufficiently weakened by Israel's attacks. Only then was Hezbollah willing to abandon its insistence that ending its missile and drone attacks against Israel would first require a permanent cease-fire in Gaza.

Additionally, negotiations worked because Israel had clear, limited, and achievable political objectives. The Israelis understood that they could not eliminate Hezbollah; instead, they aimed to ensure that Hezbollah could have no forces south of the Litani River and could not easily rearm there. Both of these steps had been mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 1701 in 2006—but its terms were never enforced, and Hezbollah violated its terms from day one. Hochstein used Israel's military achievements and the Lebanese government's desire to reestablish sovereignty over its territory to create a far more serious approach to implementation: As many as 10,000 Lebanese soldiers will be deployed to the border, while the U.S., France, and others will help improve the capabilities of the Lebanese army. The U.S. will also provide intelligence to monitor implementation of the agreement, and will chair the committee through which any violation will be immediately addressed. Israel has reportedly received assurances from the U.S. that, if violations are not reversed, it can act militarily.

In Gaza, Israel has also successfully destroyed the military threat posed by an adversary—before October 7, 2023, Hamas had five brigades, with 24 battalions. Those are now gone, along with most of its weapons depots, labs, and production facilities. More than 60 percent of its tunnels have been blown up, including some as deep as a 25-story building. But unlike in Israel's conflict with Hezbollah, in which it set more limited goals, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly pledged “total victory” over Hamas. Just as Israel could not eliminate Hezbollah—and the U.S. could not eliminate the Taliban in Afghanistan—Israel can defeat Hamas but not eradicate it, as IDF leaders have recognized. Hamas's ideology has been profoundly destructive to the Palestinian people, and polls show that they know it. Israel now needs to translate its military achievements against Hamas in Gaza into a sustainable political outcome. Israel has repeated the mistake in Gaza that the George W. Bush administration made in Iraq and Afghanistan, and failed to marry its military action to achievable political goals at the outset.

In Gaza, Israel must avoid either a vacuum, in which Hamas could reemerge, or an indefinite stay, which would guarantee an insurgency. Israel did not adopt the successful model that General David Petraeus employed in Iraq, clearing an area of terrorists and then holding it, while building a better life for civilians. Such a model applied to Gaza would have provided Palestinians with both security from Hamas and confidence that it would not return. Instead, the IDF is still fighting in northern Gaza, even though it has cleared the area multiple times.

The most viable alternative is a mixed interim administration. The United Arab Emirates is prepared to be part of a stabilization force in Gaza, and Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Bahrain might also participate—not to bail out Israel, but to ensure that it withdraws and to end Palestinian suffering. They would join with others, including the United States and European nations, to administer Gaza. Rebuilding Gaza will be an enormous task in its own right, but it will also require the restoration of law and order, the prevention of smuggling, and the permanent demilitarization of the area.

The aim of such an administration would be to have the Palestinian Authority assume control over Gaza in 18 to 24

months. The PA today is weak, dysfunctional, and corrupt, but it can be reformed, as it was during Salam Fayyad's tenure as prime minister from 2007 to 2012. Once reformed, it could assume responsibility for Gaza. But none of this will happen unless there is an end to the war, conditioned on the release of all the hostages, and accompanied by a withdrawal of Israeli forces—which, as in Lebanon, Netanyahu can rightly claim resulted from Israel's military achievements.

In Gaza, as in Lebanon, Israel has won militarily—and so it must focus now on producing a diplomatic outcome. The Biden administration can again use the leverage of Israel's military achievements to push a political process in which Arab states and others can come into Gaza, as Secretary of State Antony Blinken has been attempting.

Our experience is that personal relationships are crucial to successful diplomacy, especially in the Middle East. President-Elect Donald Trump has great credibility with the Israeli government, and with the Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia. That he has made it clear that he wants the war in Gaza to end no doubt contributed to Netanyahu's acceptance of the U.S.-brokered cease-fire in Lebanon and adds to the prime minister's need to find an acceptable way out of Gaza. Producing an international and regional administration in Gaza and phasing out the IDF will take some time—and should be done in coordination with the incoming Trump administration. It would be a mistake for Israel to wait for the new administration, as it will take time for Trump to put in place officials who can do what the Biden administration is already doing.

The smart application of statecraft has produced a cease-fire in Lebanon, and it has now created an opening to end the war in Gaza. Peace in Gaza would also create an opportunity for Trump to expand the Abraham Accords to include the normalization of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which he has declared a priority. The Saudis want a credible pathway to a Palestinian state as the precondition of any deal, while the Israeli public and the current government are not ready to accept that. Trump will need to move quickly to leverage his political capital with the Saudis and Israelis if he hopes to pull off a deal. But if he can, a Saudi-Israeli breakthrough would transform the Middle East, creating a coalition to counter Iranian threats and promoting stability and progress in the region.

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(<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/statecraft-20-9780197698914?cc=pl&lang=en&>). This article was originally published on the Atlantic website (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2024/12/israel-gaza-war-lebanon-ceasefire/680846/>). ❖

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