

## Gaza Phase 2: Sorting Out the Political and Security Scenarios

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Neomi Neumann is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Palestinian affairs. She formerly served as head of the research unit at the Israel Security Agency, or Shin Bet, and with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Neumann recently began her doctoral studies at Tel Aviv University.



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## Brief Analysis

# What do Palestinians, Israelis, and external players see as the best option for Gaza and its people now that the first phase of the ceasefire is complete?

**O**n March 10, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Neomi Neumann, Harel Chorev, Tamar Hermann, Ghaith al-Omari, and David Schenker. Neumann is a visiting fellow at the Institute and former head of the research unit at the Israel Security Agency. Chorev is a senior researcher with the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University. Hermann is academic director of the Viterbi Family Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research at the Israel Democracy Institute. Omari is the Gilbert Foundation Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and a former advisor to the Palestinian Authority. Schenker is the Institute's Taube Senior Fellow and former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs during the first Trump administration. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## Neomi Neumann

The first phase of the Gaza ceasefire began in January and was slated to end after forty-two days. This period saw a pause in major combat between Hamas and Israel, a gradual Israeli military withdrawal from certain areas of the Strip, the entry of humanitarian aid, and multiple exchanges of hostages and prisoners.

Israel now stands at a crossroads with several options. Resuming the war in full would further weaken Hamas but also endanger the lives of the remaining hostages. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are preparing for this option under recently appointed chief of staff Eyal Zamir. Other options include adopting President Trump's "Gaza Riviera" vision (despite its questionable viability) or moving to phase two of the ceasefire, which would allow for the release of more hostages in exchange for more Palestinian prisoners. Each of these options comes with uncertain questions about Hamas's margins of flexibility, Israeli and Palestinian public perceptions, and the role of outside actors like Washington and the Arab states.

## Harel Chorev

The challenge of defeating Hamas did not stem from any particular tactic the group employed—Israel dealt quite well with its guerrilla methods and multidimensional warfare. Yet because the IDF did not attack the entirety of Gaza, completely defeating Hamas was never possible. Israeli forces conducted combat operations in approximately 70 percent of the Strip, but two major areas were generally not attacked: Gaza City, a key area for Hamas command and control, and the central refugee camps of Deir al-Balah and Nuseirat. Such areas were not targeted for fear of harming hostages. Yet Hamas cannot be fully defeated when almost a third of its area of control is essentially off limits.

Even so, the group has suffered a severe blow to its capabilities and is in a much weaker military position than has been described by mainstream media or intelligence services in the United States. Approximately 20,000 of its fighters have been killed in the war, over 50 percent of its tunnels are destroyed, and its main means of weapons production have been eliminated. The latter is a crucial accomplishment because around 90 percent of the weapons used in Gaza were produced there. Although many important materials are smuggled in from the outside, the vast majority of the weapons themselves are manufactured in Gaza, and most of that capacity has now been destroyed.

For Hamas, the first phase of the ceasefire was a tactical phase—an opportunity to urgently stop the destruction of its capabilities, rebuild its ranks, and replenish its stockpiles of aid and gasoline. It no doubt views phase two and any longer-term truce that unfolds as more of a strategic affair, focused on the goal of ensuring that Hamas survives with as many weapons as possible and with de facto control over Gaza, even if it formally agrees not to govern the territory.

In this context, it is useful to keep in mind that Islamist groups like Hamas interpret the word "*hudna*" not so much as "ceasefire" or "truce" in the modern sense, but rather as a "warrior's break"—that is, a chance to lay low until a group has recovered its strength and can return to battle. The last time Hamas offered a *hudna* was in 2007, when Ehud Olmert and Khaled Mashal were in charge and Israel was offering the Palestinians peace concessions that no Israeli would likely accept today. As it did then, Hamas would presumably depict a new *hudna* as a triumph—a message that would further erode the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority and other moderate forces. Given the catastrophe that Israelis and Palestinians alike have suffered for the past year and a half, it is more important than ever to prevent Hamas from claiming victory in this manner.

## Tamar Hermann

Israeli public perceptions of the ceasefire's first phase are revealing. According to recent polls, a slight majority of Arab Israelis believe that both Hamas and Israel's interests were served to the same degree. On the left, 35 percent believe that Hamas's interests were served best, while the same percentage believe Israel's interests benefited most. Among centrist voters, a plurality feel that Hamas interests were served best; on the right, a majority came to that same conclusion. In total, around 48 percent of Israelis polled believe that Hamas's interests were better served—a bad sign for those trying to convince the public about moving to phase two.

The hostage issue currently stands at the center of Israeli public discourse, taking precedence over all other matters. More than 80 percent of poll respondents believe that President Trump was the decisive factor in freeing those hostages who have returned home so far. In contrast, only 40 percent named Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu as the most important factor in securing their release, giving higher marks to the negotiating team, IDF pressure in Gaza, and public protests by hostage families.

Regarding the “day after” in Gaza, Jewish Israeli respondents have indicated strong support for a multinational force to control the Strip. In contrast, Arab Israeli respondents prefer a weakened Hamas to keep that role—a dramatic shift given that the majority of them expressed very strong criticism of the group at the war’s outset. The underlying reason for this shift is unclear, but in any case a gap has opened between Jewish and Arab Israelis about how to handle this aspect of postwar Gaza. Yet both communities seem to support moving to phase two of the ceasefire.

Regarding Israeli accountability for the events of the past year and a half, 48 percent of respondents believe Netanyahu should accept responsibility and resign immediately, while others believe he should resign after the war, amounting to a significant majority calling for the prime minister to step down at some point. Obviously, Netanyahu might interpret such findings as a reason to continue the fighting indefinitely in order to avoid facing majority pressure to resign postwar. As for the heads of security agencies, 58 percent of respondents from all political affiliations believe they should step down regardless of whether the political leadership resigns.

## Ghaith al-Omari

The West Bank has been volatile and fragile for quite some time, since well before October 7. Remarkably, however, the bulk of the population remained relatively quiet throughout the war. One reason for this is obvious: West Bankers did not want to suffer the destruction seen in Gaza. The problem now is that some of the Israeli tactics used in Gaza are now being used in the West Bank. This shift could erode the war’s deterrent effect, giving locals the sense that they have nothing to lose by rising up. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are already planning and conducting more terrorist attacks in and from the West Bank, accelerating the rise in tensions.

Another factor affecting the public mood in the West Bank is the strong local sentiment that Hamas has won the war. The manner in which the ceasefire, aid provision, and hostage releases were structured has allowed Hamas officials to demonstrate that they still control governance in Gaza. Recent U.S. direct talks with the group lent it additional legitimacy, enabling members to argue that the world will still engage Hamas if the Palestinian public chooses it to represent them—a message repeatedly emphasized through Hamas social media and Al Jazeera, among other outlets.

Meanwhile, the PA is trying to present itself as a viable partner for phase two and beyond. For example, it recently agreed to comply with the Taylor Force Act, which halted U.S. economic aid to the PA until it stops paying the families of “martyrs” and prisoners. Although observers are unsure how committed the PA is to this pledge, it did generate pushback among Fatah leaders, spurring chairman Mahmoud Abbas to fire some of them for opposing the measure. The Palestinian public reaction to this new policy change is unclear because they have not seen it being put into place yet.

As for Gaza’s future, militarily defeating Hamas is possible in the same sense that defeating any terrorist organization or insurgency is possible. The more important question is what one does after achieving this victory. One scenario is long-term Israeli reoccupation—an achievable but negative outcome. Another option is to maintain the current approach—that is, continuing with no plan or policy and leaving a vacuum in Gaza. Inevitably, Hamas will fill this vacuum, since there is no other power inside the Strip with sufficient arms and organizing power to take over.

Despite regional disagreements about what should be done, countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are willing to play a serious role in creating a governing alternative. Yet they are concerned about how security deconfliction with Israel and other actors would be handled on the ground.

## David Schenker

President Trump’s “Gaza Riviera” proposal was rejected outright by all of the Arab states and much of the wider international community. The notion of even temporary Palestinian displacement from the Strip was deemed unacceptable. Hence, as the parties move toward phase two, Egypt’s alternative plan is basically the only game in town.

Cairo’s proposal has two sections: one laying out the general context and another covering technical issues. The core of the plan focuses on reconstruction, laying out \$53 billion for rebuilding Gaza with Palestinians still residing there. Indeed, the Egyptian document is replete with AI-generated photos of happy Palestinians, sleek buildings, and maps, but devotes just two sentences to the priority topics of governance and security. Hamas apparently does not exist according to this plan; the group is not mentioned by name even once. Instead, one finds the profound understatement that the problem of armed factions “remains challenging.” The proposed solution? Waiting until after the root causes of the conflict are addressed and Palestinian statehood has been achieved before deciding what to do about armed groups.

Overall, Egypt’s plan is not very substantive, which is likely why Saudi leader Muhammad bin Salman and Emirati leader Muhammad bin Zayed opted not to attend Cairo’s emergency Arab League summit on March 4. The initial proposal is a consensus document drafted with input from many states, and the two Gulf leaders apparently did not deem it bold enough on issues like Hamas and governance. The Trump administration’s critique of the Cairo plan has largely focused on construction timelines and the fact that Palestinians would remain in Gaza throughout the process. Meanwhile, Israel is still inclined toward President Trump’s widely rejected proposal. Accordingly, Washington should focus on engaging Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to see if the twenty-two-member Arab League can be convinced to take a more expansive, forward-leaning approach in Gaza.

As for the administration’s unprecedented gambit of engaging in direct talks with Hamas, this approach is not productive. Hamas is merely offering what it has always offered—to go back to the *hudna* of years past, meaning a temporary truce and an inevitable return to war in the future. If the administration embraces that approach, donors are unlikely to waste their money on rebuilding Gaza only to see it potentially destroyed again, and

friction could emerge between Washington and Israel.

*This summary was prepared by Manuel de la Puerta. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family.* ❖

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