

# Gaza: How Can the Next War Be Prevented?

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Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.



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**T**he following is the executive summary of a new BICOM study by Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, IDF (Res.), The Washington Institute's Milton Fine International Fellow and former head of the IDF's Strategic Planning Division. [Read the full report on the BICOM website \(http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis/bicom-strategic-assessment-gaza-can-next-war-prevented/\)](http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis/bicom-strategic-assessment-gaza-can-next-war-prevented/).

Two years after the last round of armed conflict between Israel and militant groups in Gaza, economic hardship has left the Hamas-ruled Strip struggling to recover while the current ceasefire -- one of the quietest periods since Israel's unilateral evacuation of Gaza in 2005 -- remains fragile at best. However, opportunities exist to significantly reduce the dangers of escalation. Can the situation be improved, and can another war between Israel and Hamas be prevented?

- Gaza deserves more international policy attention and prioritisation. On the one hand, it constitutes a powder keg threatening to explode. On the other hand, policy options exist which offer opportunities to significantly reduce the dangers of escalation.
- A Hamas-ruled Gaza represents an unresolved challenge to the currently gloomy long-term prospects of Israeli-Palestinian peace, given Hamas's extreme Islamist nature, inherent objection to recognising Israel, use of terror, and rivalry with the Palestinian Authority (PA).
- Gaza's economy and infrastructures are in a dire state while the pace of reconstruction is slow, creating tremendous pressures within the Strip. Fixing them is hindered by the lack of international donor funds, the PA's reluctance to be involved in Gaza, Egypt's profound hostility towards Hamas, basic tensions with Israel, and Hamas diverting reconstruction materials to its own governance and military needs.
- Exacerbating the situation in Gaza to the detriment of the population, Hamas has been frantically re-arming itself, building its military capabilities and digging cross-border offensive tunnels for a future round of conflict with Israel, and its extremely radical military wing has developed cooperation with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Sinai, as well as with Iran.
- While Israel regards Hamas as a bitter enemy sworn to its destruction, in practical policy terms, its current attitude

towards the organisation represents constant balancing within the following tensions: Weakening Hamas, yet keeping it as a responsible de facto governing address (for lack of a better alternative) capable of enforcing a ceasefire on all other factions; maintaining Israel's policy of disengagement from Gaza while ensuring the Strip does not collapse into chaos or further militarise; and fostering deterrence vis-a-vis Hamas and other armed groups in Gaza without contributing to an undesired escalation. An additional challenge is implementing these policies without undermining the important relations with Egypt and undercutting the PA.

- Israel would prefer to use the significant deterrence vis-a-vis Hamas achieved in the 2014 Operation Protective Edge as a basis for a long-term ceasefire arrangement, which would incorporate far-reaching reconstruction projects and strict security arrangements. However, this is made harder by the difficulties in reconciling Israel and Hamas's conflicting expectations, the unresolved issue of Hamas holding Israeli citizens and soldiers' bodies, Hamas's opposition to commit to a Gaza ceasefire also applying to the West Bank, the PA's reluctance to play an active role in Gaza, and Egypt's hostile attitude towards Hamas.
- While political tools to address Gaza's basic maladies are currently limited, the key to a possible change in the picture is a more assertive role by the next U.S. administration, with active European support. The aim should be to raise international priority for basic humanitarian and economic solutions for Gaza, garner necessary international resources, and create a political context for these solutions.
- Notwithstanding the political challenges, the international community should advance available economic tools (detailed in this paper) in the areas of water, sewage, electricity, energy, housing reconstruction and economic development, in order to effectively and speedily address Gaza's collapsing infrastructures and faltering economy. A seaport should also be on the agenda, yet treated carefully given the high security and economic stakes and tied to a long-term ceasefire.
- At the same time, and in light of Hamas's ambitions to lead the Palestinian national movement in the post-Abbas era (it intends to compete in the upcoming municipal elections and may run in future national elections), these policies should be mindful not to embolden Hamas at the expense of the PA or bestow Hamas with the legitimacy it seeks as long as it refuses to renounce violence and accept a political solution which recognises Israel.

*BICOM Strategic Assessment*

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