

A Meaningful Endgame in Gaza Will Separate Transformation from Revenge

by [Ahmed Fouad Alkhatib \(/experts/ahmed-fouad-alkhatib\)](#)

Nov 3, 2023

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ahmed Fouad Alkhatib \(/experts/ahmed-fouad-alkhatib\)](#)

Ahmed Fouad Alkhatib, a U.S. citizen from Gaza, is a Middle East political analyst. He has a master's degree in intelligence studies from American Military University and has written and contributed extensively to publications on Gaza's affairs in U.S., Israeli, Jewish, and Arab outlets.



Without clearly stated goals and a well-defined exit strategy, Israel risks its counteroffensive becoming a punitive effort that costs immense civilian deaths while failing to establish lasting stability and peace in its southern sector.

Immediately after Hamas' unprecedented deadly October 7 attack that killed more than 1,400 Israelis, Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Galant declared that their military response would forever change the Gaza Strip and the entire region. Israel's stated goal is to dismantle Hamas' rule over the coastal enclave to permanently eliminate security risks from Gaza. While current Israeli strikes have put immense pressure on combatants throughout the Strip—reducing the number of daily rockets fired toward Israel and forcing militants underground—the ferocity and vastness of the bombardment, particularly against residential structures and dense neighborhoods, raise questions about the nature of the operation's objectives.

Has the Israeli military's overwhelming application of firepower been largely punitive? Or is the current counterattack part of a cohesive strategy to transform the tactical and strategic conditions in the Strip to ensure long-term stability and security? Despite warnings from analysts, observers, and even President Biden to avoid the intractable quagmire of a [reoccupation of the enclave \(https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/15/us/politics/biden-israel-gaza.html\)](#), Israeli policymakers have not yet offered a clearly defined vision for the future of Gaza beyond a [maximalist goal \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebwtNe3hGm0\)](#) of eradicating Hamas.

"The desire is understandable for revenge. But vengeance is not a strategy," said former CIA Director and retired General [David Petraeus of the current Israeli \(https://hughhewitt.com/general-david-petraeus-usa-ret-on-his-new-book-with-andrew-roberts-conflict-and-its-implications-for-the-israel-hamas-war\)](#) military actions in Gaza. Due to his experience leading U.S. occupation and counterinsurgency missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, he is acutely aware of the dangers that lacking a strategy beyond initial battlefield victories can bring. [Petraeus likewise cautioned \(https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/10/22/israel-how-to-destroy-hamas-petraeus-gps-vpx.cnn\)](#) about the reality of the day after, asking, "Will this operation take more bad guys off the street than it creates by its conduct?" You've got to be careful that the answer to that is going to be yes."

[Public sentiment in Israel \(https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-grieving-despair-mood-7de831d6cb74ff263438a1f2758b681d\)](#) supports the war effort, and most Israelis will initially tolerate high casualties as their military attempts to entirely destroy Hamas in Gaza. However, an indefinite operation or occupation is unlikely to be politically popular, especially without transitional steps and policies or a clear [Israeli plan of what a post-war future \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israels-endgame-no-sign-post-war-plan-gaza-2023-10-18/\)](#) might look like.

Hamas has proven resilient and highly adept. It has spent the past decade preparing for an epic defense of its positions in Gaza against a ground invasion, exploiting dense urban features and using well-rehearsed urban and [guerilla warfare tactics \(https://www.axios.com/2023/10/21/palestine-hamas-military-power\)](#). But assuming that Hamas can be eliminated, all its commanders and officers liquidated, hundreds of miles of [tunnels destroyed \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqsm22xbq5Q\)](#), and its armaments in the Strip confiscated, immediate challenges would quickly engulf Israeli efforts to pacify and stabilize a destroyed Gaza unless there is a clear and cogent plan for the day after. Due to Israel's preoccupation with the ground war, its hostages in Gaza, and its inability to craft a coherent post-war vision for the Strip at present, U.S. and European allies, along with Arab and Muslim partners, could meaningfully contribute to shaping the Gaza endgame.

Identifying an Administrative Infrastructure

Issues such as societal chaos, criminal mobs, the rise of warlords or dominance of powerful clans, poverty, famine, diseases, the radicalization of a resentful and beaten population, and low-intensity insurgency would present enormous security, geopolitical, humanitarian, and international challenges and consequences. As such, rebuilding an administrative infrastructure for Gaza should be an immediate priority.

An often-overlooked aspect of Hamas' control in Gaza is the difference between the group's armed wing—responsible for the terror attack on Israel—and ideological leadership on the one hand, and the administrative local government, which manages tens of thousands of civil servants, on the other. The Hamas-run government in Gaza [employs some 50,000 workers \(https://www.independentarabia.com/node/212351/%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A9/%25D8%25AA%25D9%2582%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AD%25D9%2583%25D9%2588%25D9%2585%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25BA%25D8%25B2%25D8%25A9-%25D9%258A%25D8%25AD%25D8%25AA%25D8%25AC%25D9%2588%25D9%2586-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B7%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A8%25D9%258A%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25AD%25D9%2582%25D9%2588%25D9%2582%25D9%2587%25D9%2585\)](#) in various classifications and functions—no statistics or estimates exist for how many of these are 'card-carrying' Hamas members. The group's governance of the coastal enclave also entails a hybrid structure of its members in key posts, professional technocratic elements, PA employees who enjoy international recognition and legitimacy, and a diverse web of local charities and international NGOs.

These administrative employees include policemen, firefighters, teachers, sanitation and municipal workers, and healthcare staff. Gaza's governance is thereby facilitated by a mix of Hamas' own governmental structures and administrative bodies tied to the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority (PA) government. The PA has staff in Gaza who control critical sectors such as finance, border crossings, some ministerial posts, and the issuance of ID cards and passports. The destruction of Gaza and toppling of Hamas' rule pose serious questions about the fate of the 'administrative state' within the Strip and what becomes of its civil servants, a considerable number of whom are not members of Hamas.

A contextually relevant U.S. mistake worthy of consideration is what occurred in the immediate aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. ["De-Ba'athification" policies and the disbanding of the Iraqi army \(https://pfiffner.gmu.edu/files/pdfs/Articles/CPA%20Orders,%20Iraq%20PDF.pdf\)](#) were initiated to get rid of remnants of Saddam's regime and prevent them from holding public sector jobs in a new Iraq. What the United States failed to consider is that whenever a single party like the Ba'ath dominates and governs a country or territory, direct or incidental affiliation to the party is integral to civil servant life.

In such settings, anyone seeking government work must cozy up to members of the ruling party to improve their odds, often having to either join the party or display approval of its policies and practices. When implementing de-Ba'athification in Iraq, technocrats who were casual members or associates of the Ba'ath were lumped in with ideological constituents, preventing

the new post-Saddam administration from absorbing seasoned professionals who could have helped stabilize the country. U.S. diplomats, [historians, and experts have attributed](https://journals.library.cornell.edu/tmpfiles/CIAR_9_2_2.pdf) (https://journals.library.cornell.edu/tmpfiles/CIAR_9_2_2.pdf) a significant amount of the ensuing insurgency, crime, chaos, and radicalization in Iraq to this ill-conceived policy enacted by Paul Bremer, the leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority overseeing the occupation of Iraq.

An Israeli occupation of the Strip would face similar challenges if Gaza's civil and administrative structures are disbanded along with Hamas militants and on-the-ground leadership, and a systematic purging of anyone with previous ties to Hamas takes place in post-war Gaza.

Facilitating International Humanitarian and Security Assistance

If the administrative infrastructure is maintained, Gaza will still need security assistance and significant humanitarian support. The most viable option to address what becomes of Gaza after Hamas is completely eliminated or severely weakened is transitional international custodianship of the Strip under the United Nations. This would entail administering Gaza's affairs and providing basic governing structures for sustaining the healthcare, education, public safety, and economic sectors.

The technocratic professionals in Gaza can play a vital role in maintaining critical functions and keeping various departments and agencies going, leveraging their experiences and local know-how. Arab, U.S., and European involvement and support could initiate a transformative transition for Gaza and create possibilities for a different future. Most importantly, neither Israel nor Egypt will likely be viable transport or access pathways in and out of the coastal enclave. Gaza has a strategic feature: it overlooks the Mediterranean Sea.

Accordingly, the UN can operate safe maritime and aerial corridors directly over the sea, thereby avoiding Israeli airspace and Israeli involvement in the lives of Gazans as they provide for their needs. And while both Israel and Egypt will likely expect coordination, establishing a route to bypass the issues surrounding extant crossings into Gaza will be vital in order to facilitate the movement of critical cargo, humanitarian workers, patients, war survivors seeking to exit Gaza, travelers, and reconstruction efforts and materials. France, [for example](https://www.reuters.com/world/france-sends-helicopter-carrier-support-gazas-hospitals-2023-10-26/) (https://www.reuters.com/world/france-sends-helicopter-carrier-support-gazas-hospitals-2023-10-26/), sent a helicopter carrier to the eastern Mediterranean to support hospitals and medical needs in the Strip cope with the crisis and provide a maritime lifeline civilians in Gaza, though it is unclear how such aid will be facilitated. Future arrangements could be established whereby Palestinians from Gaza can access the West Bank via Jordan, bypassing the need to traverse Israeli territory.

Contemporary and historic precedents provide pragmatic options for addressing the needs of civilians in Gaza upon cessation of military action in the Strip. The UN's World Food Program (WFP) chartered cargo ships to transport [fuel](https://www.wfp.org/news/new-wfp-ship-arrives-aden-port-fuel-humanitarian-operations) (https://www.wfp.org/news/new-wfp-ship-arrives-aden-port-fuel-humanitarian-operations) and [food](https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-ship-food-assistance-yemen-diverted-hudaydah-aden) (https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-ship-food-assistance-yemen-diverted-hudaydah-aden) to Yemen at the height of that country's civil war and ensuing humanitarian disaster. The WFP also has an aerial arm called the UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS (https://www.wfp.org/unhas)), which flies UN-marked passenger and cargo airplanes to disaster and conflict zones. For decades, [humanitarian air operations](https://www.pua-gaza.org/humanitarian-air-operations) (https://www.pua-gaza.org/humanitarian-air-operations) have been instrumental in accessing denied areas or inaccessible parts of the world and have served as a lifeline in conflict zones throughout Africa and the Middle East. These capabilities could be vital in sustaining Gaza after the cessation of Israel's military operation. The UN's Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Martin Griffiths, stated that his agency has vast worldwide experience distributing and [managing items with potential dual-use](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDhdvnGnxXY) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDhdvnGnxXY) in conflict zones.

Furthermore, UN peacekeepers, especially troops from Arab and Muslim countries (such as Jordan, Morocco, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Turkey, and Indonesia), can likely be deployed to Gaza without antagonizing the population, who may fear or resent the presence of Western soldiers on their soil. These teams can help ensure that Gaza's borders with Israel are monitored and secured to prevent infiltrations while allowing Gazans access to vital farmlands that are near the security barrier along the Strip's borders. It is also crucial, however, to avoid the repetition of the Lebanese model, whereby UN forces [under UNIFIL's](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-avoid-another-lost-year-unifil) (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-avoid-another-lost-year-unifil) command are largely unable to stop Hezbollah from rearming and launching attacks against Israeli territories. Accordingly, the peacekeepers should be granted discretionary use of force and policing powers to enforce the ceasefire in order to maximize the potential for calm and long-term stability along Gaza's borders with Israel.

After the 2014 war between Gaza and Israel, Turkey offered to send [power-generation ships to Gaza](https://www.haaretz.com/2014-09-03/ty-article/turkey-to-send-power-supply-ship-to-gaza/0000017f-e8e1-dc7e-adff-f8eded6d0000) (https://www.haaretz.com/2014-09-03/ty-article/turkey-to-send-power-supply-ship-to-gaza/0000017f-e8e1-dc7e-adff-f8eded6d0000), just as they have [offered to Ukraine](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8mnorAdXVY) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8mnorAdXVY) after Russia's attacks destroyed a significant portion of Kyiv's electrical grid. This is one of the numerous options in which an internationally accessible Gaza through maritime and aerial corridors, under UN custodianship, could immediately work to restore life-sustaining services critical for a stable life for civilians. In addition to power generation, urgent initial action will require rubble removal, the disposal of unexploded ordnances, the provision of potable water, and the resumption of sewage treatment or pumping away from population centers to avoid the spread of disease.

In a post-Hamas Gaza, the Palestinian Authority would also need to be involved in the international custodianship of the Strip, primarily to funnel international aid and finances. However, physically re-introducing the Palestinian Authority or some of its past political figures, like the controversial Gaza native and influential powerbroker [Mohammed Dahlan](https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/30/mohammed-dahlan-uae-palestinians-israel/) (https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/30/mohammed-dahlan-uae-palestinians-israel/), would likely be a mistake.

Not only were the PA's incompetence, corruption, and thuggery significant reasons for Hamas' 2006 electoral victory and subsequent [violent takeover](https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/gaza200804) (https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/gaza200804), but its immediate introduction in a post-Hamas Gaza would be viewed as arriving on top of Israeli tanks, undermining the what little remains of the PA's legitimacy and ability to govern. Nevertheless, Gaza's long-term stability and transformation into a prosperous and peaceful territory will not occur in a vacuum. Peace in Gaza cannot be isolated from making progress on critical issues impacting Palestinians in the PA-controlled West Bank, namely settlements and access to East Jerusalem.

Without [clearly stated goals](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/20/politics/us-allies-israel-discussions-gaza-ground-invasion/index.html) (https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/20/politics/us-allies-israel-discussions-gaza-ground-invasion/index.html) and a well-defined exit strategy, Israel risks its counteroffensive becoming a punitive effort that costs immense civilian deaths while failing to establish lasting stability and peace in its southern sector. In order to prevent the perception that the Gaza endgame is about revenge, day-after plans addressing these issues should be clearly and publicly articulated.

Such a plan-or lack thereof-has broad implications; without a clear future for a post-Hamas Gaza, Israel's military actions can disastrously backfire. A destroyed Gaza without a future risks irreparable reputational damage to Israel's international standing, further inflaming anti-Semitism worldwide, diminishing prospects for growing ties and rapprochement with Arab nations like Saudi Arabia, eroding U.S. and European support for Israeli operations, and most worryingly, planting the seeds for far more violent groups and ideologies that could take Hamas' place. A transformation in Gaza will occur only if detailed and substantive plans and agreements are quickly conceived and put in place to reverse the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe and initiate reconstruction once the guns go silent. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[What Did Nasrallah Really Say, and Why?](#)

Nov 3, 2023





BRIEF ANALYSIS

Assessing the Reported Pantsir Delivery to Hezbollah

Nov 3, 2023

•
Andrew J. Tabler,
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/assessing-reported-pantsir-delivery-hezbollah)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The Hamas-Israel War: One Month On

November 6, 2023, starting at 11:00 a.m. EST (1400 GMT)

•
Dennis Ross,
Zohar Palti,
Hanin Ghaddar,
Ghaith al-Omari

(/policy-analysis/hamas-israel-war-one-month)

TOPICS

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)