



THE REALITY OF RESUMING THE WAR IN GAZA

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Ceasefire Prospects

The fragile ceasefire in Gaza [ended](#) abruptly on March 17 with a massive Israeli bombing operation launched after negotiations stalled to reach agreement on an extension. The strikes reportedly killed several Hamas leaders and hundreds of Palestinian civilians in one of the deadliest days since the war began. It was the culmination of weeks of failed efforts to pressure Hamas, which started with [cutting off](#) all food, medicine, and fuel deliveries to Gaza on March 2.

In announcing resumption of the war, Prime Minister Netanyahu [made clear](#) that “this is just the beginning” of a broad new military campaign that will continue until all his goals are met, including the “elimination” of Hamas and the return of all 59 remaining hostages, 24 of whom are [reported](#) to be alive. President Trump quickly backed Netanyahu, [saying](#) that there will be “hell to pay” for Hamas’ refusal to release the hostages.

The ceasefire mediators are still working to broker agreement on an extension, and there is some public pressure on both sides. Polls and protests in Israel [clearly favor](#) ending the war to free the hostages, but Netanyahu has always cared more about the extremists in his coalition. Meanwhile, large demonstrations have [broken out](#) in Gaza against Hamas and the war, yet its leaders have long shown indifference to the incredible suffering of the people.

Even if negotiations resume, Netanyahu has no interest in a final settlement that would leave Hamas with its current military capabilities. Hamas remains intransigent in refusing to disarm and release the hostages without international guarantees of a permanent Israeli withdrawal. Unless they effectively surrender, Netanyahu intends to continue the war. The IDF has already begun calling up tens of thousands of reservists required for a full-scale ground invasion.

Finance Minister Smotrich [said](#) the new military campaign “will look completely different from what has been done so far.” The question is how: **What is going to be different that will bring a different outcome? What is the realistic objective? And at what cost?**

Results of First Phase of the War

During the first 15 months, the IDF achieved many of its tactical objectives in Gaza. They [estimated](#) 20,000 militants were killed, including most of Hamas’ senior leadership, and much of its munition stockpiles was destroyed. President Biden [said](#) that Hamas’s military was so decimated that it no longer had the ability to threaten Israel with attacks like October 7.

However, the war did not achieve Netanyahu’s strategic objective of “[total victory](#)” and “wiping out” Hamas, which his former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant described as “[nonsense](#).” In fact, former IDF chief Gadi Eisenkot recently [said](#): “the military power of Hamas and PIJ has been restored to the point where Hamas has over 25,000 and PIJ has over 5,000 armed terrorists.” That is consistent with Secretary Blinken’s [assessment](#) that Hamas had replaced most of its casualties with new recruits.

Moreover, only a small percentage of the estimated 500 kilometer tunnel system used to hide fighters was destroyed, despite every effort. The hostages endured horrifying conditions, and far too many died in captivity. The IDF lost [some 400 soldiers](#), with many more badly wounded.

The human cost in Gaza was staggering: [Over 50,000](#) died, including at least 25,000 women and children, with tens of thousands more injured. [Some 90%](#) of the population, about half of whom are under the age of 18, was displaced, with many suffering from severe malnutrition under the looming threat of widespread famine. An [estimated 70%](#) of all the buildings were damaged or destroyed, including 90% of the housing units and most schools and hospitals.

New Military Campaign

Despite the obvious costs and shortcomings, the reported outline of the proposed new military campaign would essentially double down on the previous approach with a few key differences.

New War Objectives: Nothing about the war thus far would suggest that Netanyahu's stated goal of the "elimination" of Hamas is any more realistic than it was before. It is also counter to the critical objective of freeing the remaining hostages, who would be placed in even more extreme peril. In fact, so far 144 Israeli hostages have been [released](#) through negotiations, and only 8 by direct military action.

Netanyahu's new ultimate objective is to implement Trump's "[Gaza Riviera](#)" proposal that calls for all civilians to leave Gaza. After rejecting all previous post-war plans for governance and security, including from Biden and most recently the Arab League, Netanyahu now [says](#) his "Day After" plan is the Trump plan. The Ministry of Defense has formed a special directorate to facilitate the "[willful departure](#)" of Palestinians from Gaza, and the Mossad was recently tasked with [convincing](#) certain African countries to take large numbers of refugees.

Moreover, Israeli leaders have repeatedly [threatened](#) annexation of territory in Gaza, and extremists in the coalition are openly advocating for rebuilding settlements. That might well be their actual objective for the next phase of the war.

Larger Scale Invasion: With the IDF presence on the Lebanon border reduced, more troops are available to fight in Gaza. Reports suggest the IDF may deploy as many as [five divisions](#), or 50,000 to 75,000 troops, in a simultaneous attack that would differ from the sector-by-sector approach of the initial invasion.

Early indications suggest that the operational plan will involve resumption of the "[General's plan](#)," which forces civilians to leave a designated area, then imposes a complete military and humanitarian blockade. This was the approach taken in the last months before the ceasefire, when much of northern Gaza was effectively de-populated. While hundreds of thousands of civilians [returned](#) home during the ceasefire, the IDF has already [ordered](#) evacuations of Beit Hanoun and Rafah. This approach would be implemented throughout Gaza, with civilians relegated to small "[humanitarian bubbles](#)."

Fewer Constraints on Civilian Casualties

Some have suggested the new campaign will be more effective without the constraints imposed by the Biden administration, which raised objections over humanitarian assistance and civilian casualties but actually did little to enforce them. In fact, Biden only withheld one shipment of [2,000 bombs](#), which have since been resumed by Trump.

A more aggressive IDF campaign could entail even more civilian casualties and less humanitarian assistance. Foreign Minister Katz seemed to be laying the groundwork for this with a [chilling ultimatum](#): "Residents of Gaza: this is a final warning ... Return the hostages and

eliminate Hamas ... The alternative is complete destruction and devastation ... You will pay the ultimate price.” Netanyahu [said](#) that while Israel will try to avoid killing non-combatants, “every civilian casualty is the fault of Hamas.”

Indefinite Occupation

A fundamental failing of the previous campaign was that after the IDF cleared an area of militants and moved on, there was no plan for a security or governance alternative to Hamas. With Netanyahu refusing repeated requests for a “Day After” plan, including from the IDF leadership, Hamas simply returned to fill the void.

The [new plan](#) reportedly calls for the IDF to fully occupy Gaza indefinitely. With UNRWA already cut off and many other NGO’s under extreme pressure, the IDF would be responsible for most civilian functions in Gaza. Humanitarian assistance would be distributed by the IDF in designated “[humanitarian hubs](#),” raising the specter that food and medicine would become tools of war. It is not clear how, or even if, schools and hospitals would be re-opened or basic services provided. Over 2 million Palestinian civilians would effectively be left at the mercy of an occupying army answering to a government determined to drive them out.

A prolonged occupation would also place a severe strain on the IDF, which is already facing resistance from reservists exhausted from multiple deployments. When Sharon [withdrew](#) the IDF from Gaza in 2005 because the cost to Israel was too great, there were only 3,000 troops with a limited mission of guarding 8,500 settlers. The Palestinian population was 1.4 million. The burden would be infinitely higher now, with tens of thousands of soldiers fighting a determined insurgency.

In short, the reported new military campaign risks increasing the incalculable suffering for civilians in Gaza and the hostages and their families, while leaving the IDF bogged down in an endless war with no realistic objectives beyond ensuring Gaza remains ungoverned and unlivable. So what is the alternative?

Alternative Approach

The “Day After” plan Biden [proposed](#), in close consultation with leading Arab allies, called for the creation of an interim administrative government, comprised of technocrats with no affiliation to Hamas, formed with input from Gazans under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority.

Egyptian President Al-Sissi has [stressed](#) that this interim civil administration “is necessary in order to serve as an alternative to Hamas, so it will dry up its ... resources.” This echoes Blinken’s [view](#) that Hamas cannot be defeated by a military campaign alone: “Without a clear alternative, a post conflict plan ... Hamas or something just as abhorrent and dangerous will grow back.”

The post conflict plans also include deployment of a temporary regional security force that would provide basic security while delivering humanitarian assistance and beginning reconstruction with major regional support. The recent Arab League proposal called for a phased reconstruction process, [starting with](#) building 200,000 temporary homes for about 1 million people over the next six months.

Netanyahu has [rejected](#) every such proposal. He refuses to consider any role for the Palestinian Authority in post-war Gaza – a requirement for regional support for security, governance, and reconstruction efforts – and continues to insist that Israel will go it alone.

Realistic Objectives

The mediators should continue to push for full implementation of the ceasefire agreement, including Phase 2 negotiations that would bring the release of all hostages and a permanent end to the war that addresses Israel's valid security concerns. This would include adopting a realistic objective of removing Hamas from power and ensuring they cannot threaten Israel again.

That is consistent with positions previously expressed by the ceasefire mediators. Trump's Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff [described](#) the U.S. redline as: "Hamas cannot have any part of any governing structure in Gaza." Egyptian President Al-Sissi embraced that standard, while [expressing](#) skepticism that it is actually possible to disarm Hamas.

In fact, Hamas has reportedly declared that it does not aspire to run Gaza, and accepted an Egyptian proposal to establish an "[administrative committee](#)" which it would not take part in. All available pressure should be brought to bear on Hamas to disarm and allow for a peaceful resolution as soon as possible.

Phased Implementation

If there is an IDF invasion, it will be impossible to enact any post-war plan that covers all of Gaza. However, it may be possible to implement the US/Arab League plans *in phases*, starting with areas that have been "cleared" of militants. Instead of leaving the IDF to remain as occupiers, a local administrative authority supported by Gazans could be installed as an alternative to Hamas while providing basic services. As soon as possible, regional peacekeepers and vetted Palestinian forces would take over local security and allow reconstruction to begin on a sector-by-sector basis, as envisioned by the Arab League plan.

This would create large, long term safe areas throughout Gaza, expanding over time, where Gazans could begin to rebuild their homes and lives. They would have a strong incentive to keep Hamas out, so the IDF does not return. This would advance the core counter-insurgency objective of separating the population from the militants, while taking advantage of growing opposition to Hamas. With rigorous oversight mechanisms in place, it could also ensure that humanitarian assistance and reconstruction funds do not fall into the wrong hands.

It would also demonstrate that Israel's long-term objective is to remove the threat of Hamas, rather than depopulating Gaza so it can be annexed and resettled. This will make it possible to bring in the type of broad, international support that will be necessary to a more stable and peaceful future for Gaza.

There are no easy answers for Gaza. Every scenario includes uncertainty and risk. But with so many lives at stake, it is essential to have a clear-eyed understanding of the extraordinary human costs and hard realities of resuming the war. The people on both sides deserve nothing less.