



A Way Out for Gaza

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What's new? After a seven-day “humanitarian pause”, Israel’s assault on Gaza has resumed, with Israeli forces pushing into Gaza’s south and fierce fighting reported around the city of Khan Younis. Aid agencies say the devastation and suffering has reached proportions they have never seen anywhere before.

Why did it happen? On 7 October, a Hamas-led attack in southern Israel saw Palestinian militants kill 1,200 people and seize many more as hostages. Israeli bombing and ground operations have since razed much of Gaza. The pause, during which Hamas released hostages and Israel freed Palestinian prisoners, collapsed on 1 December.

Why does it matter? Destroying Hamas, even its military capability – Israeli leaders’ chief war aim – will be a tall order without decimating what remains of Gaza. The human toll is already almost unimaginable. The longer the campaign drags on, the graver the danger it triggers a wider Middle East war.

What should be done? The priority is an immediate ceasefire that gets life-saving aid into Gaza. Talks about further hostage-prisoner exchanges, an extended ceasefire and interim arrangements for the strip would follow. None of these things can happen unless the U.S. presses Israel harder to end the war.

I. Overview

The past two months have been among the cruellest Israelis and Palestinians have ever suffered. The horror and scale of the Hamas-led 7 October attack, which saw militants massacre 1,200 people in Israel, mostly civilians, and take more than 200 captive, have left Israel traumatised, its sense of security shattered. In turn, Israeli operations in Gaza have been ruthless, killing upward of 17,000 Palestinians, including more than 7,000 children, displacing most of the strip’s inhabitants and razing much of its north. A short pause, during which Hamas freed 105 hostages (81 Israelis and 24 others) and Israel released 243 Palestinians held in its prisons, offered brief respite. Then, on 1 December, the assault resumed, this time in Gaza’s south. Israeli leaders say they will eradicate Hamas, or at least its military wing, but the record thus far suggests that this effort is unlikely to succeed – not without destroying much of what is left of Gaza. The U.S., which has backed Israel’s offensive but shows unease at its toll, needs to throw its weight behind an end to the fighting now.

Operations in Gaza’s south are worsening what UN relief official Martin Griffiths has described as “apocalyptic” conditions. Israel’s new measures purporting to min-

imise harm to civilians are not working. Many Palestinians, some already displaced several times, are moving farther south toward Egypt. Despite Cairo's determination to keep them on the Gaza side of the border, things are so bad that many may wind up crossing. A military occupation of the strip looms, with Israeli forces holding swathes of Gaza for some time and Palestinians cornered into smaller neighbourhoods or camps, kept alive by UN and humanitarian agencies. The war's continuation is likely to spell not the beginning of efforts to resuscitate a peace process, as some Western leaders hope, but the end of any political horizon, particularly given the uptick in settler predation and confiscation of Palestinian land in the West Bank.

Charting a viable way out appears almost impossible, but the start must be a stop to fighting. Militant rocket fire from Gaza would halt, along with Israeli military operations. Life-saving aid and basic necessities would enter the strip, subject to checks. Such a truce would ideally happen immediately, though another hostages-prisoner exchange might be necessary to get there. Talks would follow about the release of all Israelis held in Gaza and Palestinians in Israeli prisons, a longer ceasefire and interim arrangements. They would need to tackle service provision – perhaps initially involving councils of Gaza notables or former bureaucrats, who might even appoint police – and eventually Gaza's governance, which Hamas would give up. Thornier still will be persuading Israel to withdraw forces from as much of Gaza as possible and let in materials for the strip's reconstruction (some of which can also serve military ends). For that, Hamas will have to offer more than hostage releases, perhaps decommissioning some of its weapons, for instance. No Gaza truce will hold if crackdowns and settler violence in the West Bank persist.

A ceasefire along those lines would be unjust, flawed and difficult to reach, but better than the likely alternative. Israelis would still live alongside a weakened Hamas. Palestinians would remain under occupation. No one beyond militants already apprehended by Israel would be held to account for what has happened on 7 October and in Gaza since then, at least not at first. But such a deal would see all Israelis held by Palestinian militants united with their families. No repeat of the Hamas-led attacks seems plausible. Ideally, the blockade of the strip would ease. A ceasefire would dramatically lower the threat of a disastrous regional conflagration, which thus far has been kept in check but is growing. It would keep alive the chance of finding a political horizon for the war, without which no ceasefire will endure in perpetuity – though admittedly the obstacles are formidable and surmounting them would require far greater effort from world leaders than they have invested in recent years. Most importantly, it would offer Gaza's people a way out of the hell in which they are caught.

None of these things can happen without a change of heart in Washington. U.S. President Joe Biden, whose foreign policy record has mostly been good, has got Gaza wrong. Behind-the-scenes U.S. diplomacy contributed to the late November pause. It might have tempered Israeli tactics, though the toll in Gaza suggests not enough. Overall, though, the administration is complicit and perceived as such around the world in the strip's destruction. Pushing not for a halt to operations but for their more humane conduct misses the point. Letting Israel finish the job will likely finish off Gaza and, with it, any hope of a viable solution after more than a half-century of occupation and the 7 October atrocities. By no means does the White House have total sway over Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but it can do more to bring the war to an end. It cannot wait a few more weeks to act.

II. Devastation and Growing Dangers

At the break of dawn on 7 October, under cover of rocket salvos, Hamas launched Operation al-Aqsa Deluge, breaking through the security fence separating the Gaza Strip from Israel.¹ Members of the Hamas military wing, the Qassam Brigades, disabled Israeli communications systems and attacked Israeli army posts, then rampaged through virtually unprotected Israeli communities in the vicinity, killing civilians and grabbing hostages, in addition to hunting down and slaughtering partygoers at an outdoor rave. Fighters from other Palestinian factions as well as armed Gaza residents poured through breaches in the barrier, some joining in the violence. There is evidence of sexual assault, torture and mutilation.² It took Israel hours to regain its footing and the army days to clear the area of holed-up Palestinian militants, killing 1,000 to 1,500 of them. By the time the Hamas-led attack was over, some 1,200 people had been murdered and another 240 seized, civilians and soldiers, Israelis and foreigners.

Israel's response, Operation Iron Swords, started that same evening. Over the first week, Israel dropped 6,000 bombs, more than the U.S.-led coalition in any month of its campaign against the Islamic State, or ISIS, in 2014-2019. By the time Israel began its ground invasion about three weeks in, it had loosed 10,000 bombs, just on Gaza City, an area much smaller than Manhattan island in New York City. When the "humanitarian pause" kicked in after seven weeks, Israel had struck more targets, with much larger bombs, than in the heaviest year of the anti-ISIS campaign.³ The horrific casualty numbers may well be an undercount, given that Israel is targeting the institutions in Gaza that tally casualties and that many bodies remain buried under rubble. On-the-ground information is getting harder to come by. Israeli bombing has killed nearly 70 journalists in the strip since 7 October, more than were killed during the entire Vietnam war.⁴

The assault has devastated much of the strip. On 22 October, with ground incursions looming, Israel dropped leaflets telling the population of northern Gaza, some 1.1 million people, to flee southward.⁵ It is now depopulated and largely unliveable.⁶

¹ For background, see Crisis Group Statement, "A Ceasefire in Gaza", 18 October 2023.

² On sexual assault, see "Gender-based Violence as a Weapon of War during the October 7 Hamas Attacks", Physicians for Human Rights Israel, 26 November 2023. On torture and mutilation, see "Israeli forensic teams describe signs of torture, abuse", Reuters, 15 October 2023.

³ Israel has dropped 2,000-pound bombs in densely populated urban areas. The U.S., by contrast, hesitated to use 500-pound bombs in Mosul and Raqqa, cities in Iraq and Syria, respectively, where ISIS was dug in and whose inhabitants are more spread out. Israel's goal has been to destroy tunnels Hamas uses in Gaza and knock down buildings it suspects of harbouring militants or materiel. It says it uses the "smallest available ordnance" as it deals with military challenges with "unique characteristics" in Gaza. These include an extensive tunnel network and the intermingling of combatants and civilians – and hostages – in a tiny territory. Military historian Robert Pape wrote, "Gaza will also go down as a place name denoting one of history's heaviest conventional bombing campaigns". "Military briefing: The Israeli bombs raining on Gaza", *Financial Times*, 6 December 2023. See also "Israel dropped more bombs on Gaza in 6 days than the US-led coalition dropped in any month fighting ISIS", *Business Insider*, 13 October 2023.

⁴ "NUJ condemns unprecedented death toll of journalists in Gaza", National Union of Journalists, 5 December 2023.

⁵ "Israel tells Gazans to move south or risk being seen as 'terrorist' partner", Reuters, 22 October 2023.

Fewer than one in ten of its 1.2 million residents remain. At least half of its buildings have been damaged, among them hospitals, schools, mills and UN facilities.⁷ Some neighbourhoods have been razed, unrecognisable to the erstwhile residents. Tanks and airstrikes have torn up roads, making many impassable. Throughout the strip, 60 per cent of housing units have been damaged, as have electricity, water and sewerage services.⁸ Israeli forces have also ruined agricultural land.⁹

A total siege of Gaza, intensifying the sixteen-year blockade it has already endured, has exacerbated the dire conditions. On 7 October, Israel stopped all food, water and fuel from entering the strip, severed its connection to the territory through its main crossing, Kerem Shalom, barred supplies from reaching Gaza through Egypt and cut off the provision of electricity.¹⁰ A limited amount of aid (about 20 truckloads per day) started coming into the strip on 21 October. Aid and fuel deliveries picked up during the “pause”, though even then the daily flow of 170 trucks (an average of 500 trucks entered prior to the war, when fewer people relied on aid) was not enough to help even the most desperate, much less sustain a population of 2.3 million people.¹¹

Human rights and humanitarian organisations and UN agencies, as well as some states, question whether Israeli operations comply with international humanitarian law.¹² Officers, some with urban combat experience, who serve in militaries that conduct exercises with Israel express disquiet – and often shock – at what they see as a profound shift in Israeli targeting decisions and its attitude toward civilian casualties.¹³ One such officer, today in a senior political post, said, “Nobody I talk to accepts Israel’s definition of proportionality. What they are doing is appalling”.¹⁴ Similarly scathing

⁶ Israeli security officials claim they are considering letting Palestinians return to the north once operations there are complete, though the feasibility of this idea is unclear. Crisis Group interviews, December 2023.

⁷ Crisis Group observations, October–November 2023. See also “In maps: Half of northern Gaza’s buildings wrecked by war”, *Financial Times*, 20 November 2023. Much of the ground operation in the north focused on hospitals, especially Gaza’s largest, al-Shifa, which Israel asserted Hamas was using as a base. Thus far, evidence suggests that fighters were present in hospitals, storing weapons there and bringing hostages there on 7 October, but not that al-Shifa served as Hamas’s command centre. See Josef Federman, “Israel reveals signs of Hamas activity at al-Shifa, but command center remains elusive”, AP, 23 November 2023. See also “The Shifa Hospital: Live Updates Regarding All Terrorist Infrastructure Located”, 20 November 2023, at the Israel Defense Forces’ War against Hamas mini-site.

⁸ “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel – Flash Update 54”, UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Aid (OCHA), 29 November 2023.

⁹ See tweet by Human Rights Watch, @hrw, 7:58am, 4 December 2023; and “Israeli army bulldozed agricultural land during truce, HRW reports”, *L’Orient Today*, 4 December 2023.

¹⁰ Israel has indicated that the severing of ties will be permanent. Before the war, it issued permits to some 18,000 workers from Gaza to fill jobs in Israel. After the 7 October attacks, it detained thousands of these labourers, eventually allowing them to go to camps in the West Bank. They have no way at present to get back to their families in Gaza. Nor will they be able to return to their jobs in Israel. On 2 November, the Israeli security cabinet stated: “There will be no more Palestinian workers from Gaza”. “As Israel forces Gazan workers back, thousands more remain stuck in the West Bank”, NPR, 3 November 2023.

¹¹ A fuller Crisis Group briefing on the humanitarian emergency in Gaza is forthcoming.

¹² Examples include the International Committee of the Red Cross, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and many UN agencies.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, November 2023.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, November 2023.

are military legal officers who in the past have participated in exchanges with Israel on the technical aspects of international humanitarian law.¹⁵

Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, too, have seen conditions deteriorate.¹⁶ Israel has locked down the territory since 7 October, cancelling permits that enable some Palestinians to work, shop or visit family and friends in Israel and East Jerusalem. For Israel, the restrictions aim to prevent attacks, of which there have been several. Indeed, Palestinian armed groups that emerged predominantly in the northern West Bank in the latter half of 2021, largely suppressed prior to 7 October, have re-emerged and proliferated.¹⁷ Israel also has stepped up army raids, arresting hundreds and escalating its use of force to a level not seen in years.¹⁸ Palestinians are periodically confined to villages or towns, with Israeli soldiers or settlers blocking the exits, whether out of security concerns or as harassment.

There has been a sharp uptick in settler violence – the various ways in which Israeli citizens in the occupied West Bank terrorise and harm Palestinians.¹⁹ Settlers have stepped up abuse of Palestinians in an effort to seize more land, with soldiers largely standing by, or in some cases, taking part. Over 1,000 Palestinians – fifteen entire communities – have abandoned their homes because of settler attacks.²⁰ The Biden administration has repeatedly called on Israel to rein in the settlers, going so far as to impose visa bans on individual offenders.²¹ Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, for his part, at one point condemned settler violence before dismissing criticism of it as “baseless”.²²

Risks of a wider confrontation are serious, even if neither Iran and its non-state allies nor the U.S. and Israel want full-blown war.²³ Most volatile is the Israel-Lebanon border, where Israel and the Shiite party-cum-militia Hizbollah have traded missile fire. Hizbollah has aimed to tie down Israel’s military below the threshold of the all-out war the two sides fought in 2006. Israel, too, has sought to avoid escalating so as to focus on Gaza. But the border tension could take on a life of its own. Hizbollah has deployed more forces, including its most experienced, up to the border, openly vio-

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, November 2023. See also Mark Lattimer, “Assessing Israel’s Approach to Proportionality in the Conduct of Hostilities in Gaza”, *Lawfare*, 16 November 2023.

¹⁶ Tahani Mustafa, “With All Eyes on Gaza, Israel Tightens Its Grip on the West Bank”, Crisis Group Commentary, 24 November 2023.

¹⁷ Ibid. For background, see Tahani Mustafa, “The New Generation of Palestinian Armed Groups: A Paper Tiger?”, Crisis Group Commentary, 17 April 2023.

¹⁸ On 22 October, for instance, an airstrike in Jenin destroyed a mosque, where Israel said weapons were stored, killing two Palestinians. “Jenin mosque bombed in Israeli airstrike”, Al Jazeera, 22 October 2023.

¹⁹ These range from blocking roads or access to land and water sources to setting cars, homes or other property on fire, stealing livestock, burning or cutting down olive trees, throwing stones, and vandalising churches and mosques, as well as various forms of physical and verbal harassment, and increasingly, live fire. Mairav Zonszein, “Settler Violence Rises in the West Bank during Gaza War”, Crisis Group Commentary, 6 November 2023.

²⁰ “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel – Flash Update 57”, OCHA, 2 December 2023.

²¹ Humeyra Pamuk, “U.S. to impose visa bans soon on Israeli extremist settlers for West Bank violence”, Reuters, 1 December 2023.

²² Amir Tibon and Ben Samuels, “Netanyahu condemns settler violence as gesture to Biden, then rushes to appease his base”, *Haaretz*, 9 November 2023.

²³ Crisis Group Commentary, “The Gaza War Reverberates across the Middle East”, 4 November 2023.

lating – previously it did so more discreetly – the UN resolution that ended the 2006 war and marked off a zone where Lebanese state security personnel could be stationed but no non-state armed group present. At some point, Israel could try more vigorously to push Hizbollah back.²⁴ That might not immediately bring full-fledged confrontation, but it could provoke further retaliation. An attack by either side that killed large numbers of civilians could set off a spiral that gets out of any one actor's control.

U.S. forces in the Middle East have been engaged in strikes and counter-strikes with other Iran-backed groups.²⁵ Most have taken place in Syria and Iraq, but U.S. military assets have also been attacked by the Houthis, the Iran-aligned rebels in Yemen. These engagements come amid a surge of U.S. military deployments, including two carrier groups, to the region.²⁶ The longer the war in Gaza and the greater the destruction, the graver the danger of regional escalation.

III. Israel's Trauma and Retribution

The Hamas-led attack is the worst national security debacle in Israel's history. If the shock feels existential, it is because the population's sense of security and military superiority was broken that day, along with faith that the government can keep the country safe. A steady drip of details of the attacks' depravity has only deepened the trauma. Prime Minister Netanyahu's description of Operation Iron Swords as Israel's "second war of independence", however hyperbolic it seems, resonates with the feeling of national crisis and what Israel sees as the absolute necessity of eliminating Hamas and restoring the army's credibility.²⁷ The Israeli cabinet has given Hamas leaders the choice of defeat or surrender; first on its list of objectives is to topple Hamas's government in Gaza and destroy its military capacity – though when prominent officials speak, they talk more about getting rid of Hamas entirely.²⁸

²⁴ "Israel could open second front in Lebanon, defense minister hints", *Politico*, 6 December 2023.

²⁵ Brian Finucane, Lahib Higuel, Naysan Rafati and Ali Vaez, "Understanding the Risks of U.S.-Iran Escalation amid the Gaza Conflict", Crisis Group Commentary, November 2023.

²⁶ Washington dispatched the first aircraft carrier, the *USS Gerald Ford*, along with its supporting warships and air squadrons, to the eastern Mediterranean shortly after the 7 October attacks. Its deployment was subsequently extended. Alison Bath, "Ford carrier group to stay deployed amid attacks on US troops in Middle East", *Stars and Stripes*, 22 November 2023. The second, the *USS Dwight Eisenhower*, arrived on 4 November, along with a guided missile cruiser, two guided missile destroyers and a carrier air wing made up of nine squadrons. See tweet by U.S. Central Command, @CENTCOM, 12:30pm, 4 November 2023.

²⁷ "This is Israel's second war of independence. It will be long and tough", I24 News, 29 October 2023.

²⁸ Soon after the 7 October attacks, for instance, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant vowed that Hamas would be "wiped from the face of the earth". Carrie Keller-Lynn, "Gallant vows to 'wipe Hamas from earth' after 'the worst terror attack' in history", *Times of Israel*, 12 October 2023. Before the "humanitarian pause" ended, Netanyahu said: "From the beginning of the war, I set three goals: the elimination of Hamas, the return of all our abductees and to ensure that Gaza will never again be a threat to Israel. These three goals remain in place". "Netanyahu, Gallant emphatic war will resume soon, though current truce may be extended", *Times of Israel*, 29 November 2023.

Israeli officials argue that operations so far have dealt Hamas a major blow. The government claims that it has killed an estimated 5,000-7,000 militants.²⁹ (The Qassam Brigades' total strength is generally estimated at around 30,000.) It has destroyed Hamas bases and materiel, as well as several buildings from which the group exercised its rule.³⁰ It also claims to have discovered 800 tunnel shafts, destroying 500 shafts and, of those, 300 entire tunnels.³¹ With 91 Israeli soldiers killed since the beginning of the ground operation, losses are less than many analysts had expected.³²

The war has granted Prime Minister Netanyahu a reprieve from a corruption trial and Israel's biggest-ever protests, denouncing his government's judicial overhaul plan, that were running weekly for most of a year until 7 October. The attack on his watch has made him even less popular. Many Israelis believe he is on borrowed time.³³ Bringing in former defence minister Benny Gantz, a retired army general, has given the cabinet additional domestic legitimacy and military expertise, but it has not changed the government's far-right complexion. Ministers have, for instance, talked about using a nuclear weapon in Gaza.³⁴ The promotion of extreme ideas, such as Palestinians' transfer from Gaza (whether temporarily to Sinai to enable ground operations and protect civilians, or permanently), is being normalised.³⁵

Israelis by and large lack a good sense of what is happening in Gaza, and Israeli mainstream media rarely shows images of Palestinian suffering. A continued state of mourning and frustration keeps the focus inward. The mobilisation of more than 250,000 reservists has stifled the economy; schools in much of the country closed for the first few weeks after 7 October due to rocket barrages; and 200,000 Israelis have been displaced from their homes, not only in the south next to Gaza but also near the Lebanese border in the north.³⁶

The vast majority of Israeli Jews believe Hamas cannot remain intact, both as a matter of principle and because they consider the threat the movement poses too severe.³⁷ That said, the hostages' return – the pause saw 81 Israeli citizens released in exchange for 243 Palestinians freed from Israeli jails – did, at least for a time, overshadow the military objective among the public. (Hamas also let 24 foreign na-

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, 5 December 2023. See also "Israel says it uncovered 800 shafts to Hamas tunnels below Gaza", Reuters, 3 December 2023.

³⁰ Amos Harel, "Hamas can't hold the Israeli army back – but Sinwar has other plans", *Haaretz*, 8 December 2023.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Israeli security official, 4 December 2023.

³² "2 troops seriously hurt in failed hostage rescue; Gallant: signs Hamas is breaking", *Times of Israel*, 8 December 2023.

³³ A 3 November poll found that 76 per cent of Israelis want Netanyahu to step down, either right away or after the war. "After Hamas attack, most Israelis want Netanyahu to resign, according to poll", NPR, 11 November 2023.

³⁴ "Far-right minister says nuking Gaza an option, PM suspends him from cabinet meetings", *Times of Israel*, 5 November 2023.

³⁵ Yuval Abraham, "Expel all Palestinians from Gaza, recommends Israeli govt ministry", +972, 30 October 2023.

³⁶ "About 200,000 Israelis internally displaced amid ongoing Gaza war, tension in north", *Times of Israel*, 22 October 2023.

³⁷ More than half of Israeli Jews recently polled thought Israel was using "too little firepower" in Gaza; fewer than 2 per cent thought it was using too much. Anna Gordon, "What Israelis think of the war with Hamas", *Time*, 10 November 2023.

tionals go in separate deals.) Every returned captive's family says it will continue agitating until all hostages are freed; without that, they say, there is no victory.³⁸ The country's leaders have thus been forced to at least voice their commitment to bringing the hostages home, even if the focus returned to fighting after the pause ended.

The government's endgame remains murky. It insists that it will fight until it eliminates Hamas and that it can keep negotiating for further hostage releases amid the hostilities. Netanyahu has said Israel will retain some form of security control of all Gaza indefinitely, though he maintains that this arrangement will not be a reoccupation of the strip.³⁹ At the same time, he is still clearly preoccupied with salvaging his political career. He is virtually the only leader who has taken no responsibility for the 7 October failure. The attacks may prove his undoing – and most Israelis would like to see him go – but continuing military operations could offer, for a time, a way for him to put off a U.S. push to restart diplomacy and retain power. It could also allow him and his coalition partners, whose poll numbers also have plummeted, to continue pursuing their annexationist agenda in the West Bank unfettered.

IV. Palestinians' Trauma and Uncertain Future

Palestinians were deeply shocked by the 7 October attacks, both because Israel's defences were breached with such apparent ease and because the casualties were so numerous and mostly Israeli, not Palestinian, as they are accustomed to.⁴⁰ Surprise quickly turned to dread, as Palestinians realised that the attacks' brutality and scale had rallied Western support for Israel, giving it a freer hand than it might usually have. Everything since – the destruction in Gaza, increased settler militancy and crackdowns in the West Bank and East Jerusalem – has heightened Palestinians' fear that worse is to come. Many worry that Israel will push the Palestinians in Gaza into exile in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and drive those in the West Bank into Jordan next.⁴¹ Many evince disbelief at what they see as efforts in Western capitals to dissociate the 7 October attack from the 56 years of military occupation that preceded it.⁴²

The seven-day pause that began on 24 November brought only partial respite. For Gaza, aid that entered the strip during the truce was insufficient, though people did sleep better knowing that they and their families would not be killed overnight. Residents of northern Gaza were unable to travel there to retrieve possessions, see what was left of their homes or find the bodies of lost relatives, as many had hoped

³⁸ The hostages' families have launched a nationwide "bring them home" campaign. Signs throughout Israel say "no victory without hostages" and "get them home first". Crisis Group observations, October-December 2023.

³⁹ "Israel does not seek to occupy Gaza", Reuters, 9 November 2023.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Palestinians in the West Bank, 7-13 October 2023. See also Mustafa, "With All Eyes on Gaza, Israel Tightens Its Grip on the West Bank", *op. cit.*

⁴¹ Several senior Israeli politicians have explicitly articulated such goals, compounding the anxiety among Palestinians. See "A second Nakba': Echoes of 1948 as Israel orders Palestinians to leave", Al Jazeera, 14 October 2023. The term Nakba, Arabic for "catastrophe", refers to the 1947-1948 expulsion and flight of Palestinians.

⁴² Crisis Group telephone interview, senior member of the Palestinian NGO network PNGO, 29 November 2023.

to do.⁴³ The release of prisoners under the truce's terms was also bittersweet. Many of them – mostly women and children as young as ten – had been jailed for years for minor offences.⁴⁴ Palestinians welcomed them home, but Israel's arrest campaign in the West Bank replenished the prisoner population almost immediately: in the pause's first four days, Israel rounded up almost as many Palestinians as it had let go.⁴⁵

As for Hamas, it has historically gained popularity among Palestinians when it is seen to be pursuing armed resistance to Israel and this pattern has held in the present war. The Hamas government was disliked in Gaza beforehand, but today, though one still hears expressions of frustration at the group, more Palestinians are rallying behind the group.⁴⁶

In contrast, the Palestinian Authority (PA) is weaker than ever. In Palestinians' eyes, it has once again subordinated itself to Israel and cooperated with crackdowns in the West Bank as Hamas fights in Gaza.⁴⁷ Western leaders hope it can play a post-war administrative role in Gaza – at least once it is “revitalised” and achieves “significant governance reforms” – but Netanyahu rejects this notion.⁴⁸ The PA, for its part, refuses to take over Gaza under current circumstances.⁴⁹ Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh has emphasised integration of Hamas into the Palestine Liberation Organisation on the basis of its acceptance of the PLO's political platform, which could mend the long-running administrative rift between Gaza, run by Hamas, and the West Bank, run by Fatah (the PA's dominant party).⁵⁰ Reconciliation between the two Palestinian factions is hard to envisage, though the PA's position on the requirements for its return to Gaza could keep evolving. In the meantime, former Fatah figures who hail from Gaza have met with Hamas political leaders in the Qatari capital Doha.⁵¹

⁴³ Israel, having declared the north a combat zone, shot and killed several Palestinians who attempted the trip. The killings deterred others. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Gaza residents, 24 November-2 December 2023. “Israeli forces open fire to stop people returning to north Gaza”, Al Jazeera, 24 November 2023.

⁴⁴ “Freed Palestinians were mostly young and not convicted of crimes”, *The New York Times*, 1 December 2023.

⁴⁵ “Israel arrests almost as many Palestinians as it has released during truce”, Al Jazeera, 28 November 2023.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group observations, October-November 2023; telephone interviews, Gaza residents, October-November 2023.

⁴⁷ For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°238, *Managing Palestine's Looming Leadership Transition*, 1 February 2023.

⁴⁸ Tovah Lazaroff, “Netanyahu: Palestinian Authority can't return to Gaza, this isn't Oslo 2”, *Jerusalem Post*, 4 December 2023; “PA's Abbas a 'liability' in planning for post-war Gaza, Arab officials say”, *Times of Israel*, 30 November 2023.

⁴⁹ President Mahmoud Abbas initially conditioned the PA's participation on a comprehensive two-state solution. “Gaza could see return of PA in case of a 'political solution', says Abbas”, Al Jazeera, 5 November.

⁵⁰ “Palestinian Authority working with US on Gaza postwar political plan”, Bloomberg, 7 December 2023.

⁵¹ PA's Abbas a 'liability' in planning for post-war Gaza, Arab officials say”, op cit.

V. Washington's Choice

If Israel's approach to Hamas changed dramatically on 7 October, much about the U.S. approach to Israel in wartime has stayed the same. Understandably, given the nature of Hamas's attacks, Washington expressed total support for Israel in the conflict's opening stages. It has repeatedly signalled its agreement with Israel's primary war aim, Hamas's destruction. President Joe Biden guaranteed that Washington would "provide [the Israelis] with everything they need" and, indeed, the U.S. has supplied Israel with weaponry as well as diplomatic cover at the UN.⁵² Biden himself was deeply affected, as were other top officials, by the Hamas attacks.⁵³ He went to Israel on 18 October, the first-ever wartime visit by a U.S. president, to underscore his sympathy for the country. As always, domestic politics has played a role, particularly with the 2024 presidential election drawing near and the opposition Republicans looking to use backing for Israel as a wedge issue.

Officials argue that marshalling U.S. influence with Israel at times like these requires a "bear hug": voicing strong support to build trust, especially with the Israeli public, in hopes that this stance will give Washington greater sway with Israeli leaders in private. Officials say their private messaging has been direct from the start regarding civilian casualties and military strategy.⁵⁴ They claim early if limited successes in pushing Israel to delay its ground offensive in Gaza and reduce the invading force's size. Similarly, they highlight the U.S. role in pushing for humanitarian aid at a time when Israel was adamant about not allowing assistance into Gaza.⁵⁵ The U.S. publicly and privately advocated for the "humanitarian pause" and exchange of hostages and prisoners. These things probably would not have happened without U.S. diplomacy, alongside that of Qatar and Egypt.

Overall, though, U.S. policy has signalled to the Israeli cabinet that it faces few restraints in Gaza, made Washington complicit in the assault and exacted a heavy price upon the Biden administration. Attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria by Iran-backed groups, which had abated before October, resumed. The U.S. approach to the war has reinforced, once again, a sense in much of the world of Western double standards regarding Israel, all the more so given the strenuous U.S. and European condemnation of Russia's brutal tactics in Ukraine. The White House's stance has triggered renewed fury among Muslims worldwide. There are domestic costs, too. The president's unstinting backing for Israel has sown discord within his Democratic Party, undermining his standing with Arab and Muslim Americans and younger voters.⁵⁶ His re-election prospects may suffer.⁵⁷

⁵² "President Joe Biden: The 2023 60 Minutes interview transcript", CBS News, 15 October 2023.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, Washington, October 2023.

⁵⁴ Visiting Israel on 18 October, Biden said he empathised with the anger Israelis were feeling about the 7 October attacks, comparing it to what people in the U.S. felt when al-Qaeda struck New York and Washington in 2001. But he cautioned: "While you feel that rage, don't be consumed by it". "Remarks by President Biden on the October 7th Terrorist Attacks and the Resilience of the State of Israel and Its People", White House, 18 October 2023.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Washington, October-November 2023.

⁵⁶ "Poll: Biden's standing hits new lows amid Israel-Hamas war", NBC News, 19 November 2023.

⁵⁷ See "Will Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas war turn off young and Muslim voters in 2024?", ABC News, 28 November 2023.

The administration itself is racked by division over Gaza. Reporters have learned of dissent cables sent to Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressing upset over aspects of U.S. policy and internal meetings in which staff have voiced concerns.⁵⁸ In private, officials express anger at the conflict's toll upon Palestinian civilians and the slow pace of aid delivery, which has been delayed by prolonged negotiations over every incremental increase.⁵⁹ They rue Biden's questioning of the Gazan health ministry's civilian casualty figures (the president himself reportedly regrets casting doubt on these tallies, which the administration now accepts as largely accurate).⁶⁰

Washington's pull with Netanyahu is by no means absolute, but it can do more to get Israel to wind down operations more quickly. Admittedly, the U.S. most commonly relies on exhortation, which may work for secondary matters but not for what Israel sees as core interests. Netanyahu has sometimes publicly rejected U.S. proposals – from the notion that the PA return to Gaza to the idea, which he has long repudiated, of a Palestinian state.⁶¹ Nor is the Biden administration at all inclined to place conditions on vast U.S. military aid to Israel. A Congress that includes legislators no less hawkish than Netanyahu's own cabinet would furiously resist such a step.⁶² Even among Democrats, support for Israel's campaign is overwhelming. That said, it seems unlikely that the Israeli government would continue its offensive, at least in its current form, expressly against U.S. wishes, particularly were Biden himself vested in ending the war and able to package a ceasefire as part of a deal that gave Netanyahu something to present as a success – the release of the rest of the Israelis whom Palestinian militants are holding in Gaza, for example.

VI. The Assault on Southern Gaza

On 1 December, after the seven-day pause, Israel and Hamas went back to war.⁶³ Israel has since launched heavy airstrikes, resumed ground operations in the north and moved troops into Khan Younis in the south, where fierce fighting rages. Hamas has fired rocket barrages consistently at southern and central Israel. Israel maintains

⁵⁸ See Michael Crowley and Edward Wong, "State Department employees send Blinken 'dissent' cables over Gaza policy", *The New York Times*, 13 November 2023.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Washington, October-November 2023. One official noted the absurdity of the U.S. president picking up the telephone to get an additional 50 aid trucks into Gaza a single time.

⁶⁰ Ibid. Biden reportedly met with a delegation of Arab and Muslim Americans offended by his statements. "I'm sorry", he reportedly told a woman who had lost 100 family members. "I'm disappointed in myself". "White House grapples with internal division on Israel-Gaza", op. cit.

⁶¹ "Netanyahu vows 'total victory' against Hamas; says PA rejects Israel, can't rule Gaza", *Times of Israel*, 3 December 2023.

⁶² "Eliminate', 'eradicate', 'level': U.S. politicians escalate rhetoric against Hamas", *Politico*, 11 October 2023.

⁶³ Each side blamed the other for violating the ceasefire, though the deal collapsed due to a stalemate in the prisoner swap negotiations. Israel claimed that Hamas refused to release the last group of women and children among the hostages. Hamas said it did not have the full daily quota of ten women and children remaining in Gaza (or at least in its custody), offered a number of men to round out the daily quota of ten, and indicated interest in expanding the hostage/prisoner exchanges to men. Israeli journalist Raviv Drucker confirmed that Hamas had offered to hand over seven women, but Israel refused and ended the pause. See tweet by Raviv Drucker, @RavivDrucker, 5:29am, 2 December 2023 [Hebrew].

that its war to destroy Hamas is just getting started, with intensive operations set to last “at least another couple of months”, focusing on killing top Hamas leaders, among other objectives.⁶⁴ A longer rolling campaign, will follow, officials say, from inside or outside Gaza as necessary.⁶⁵ Exchanges of fire between Israel and Hizbollah, which had stopped during the pause, also restarted.

Despite pushing to extend the truce, Washington publicly backs Israel’s operations in the south, though top administration officials are more vocal about the war’s toll on civilians and privately voice frustration at Israeli intransigence, the difficulty of aid access and extent of the damage.⁶⁶ Patience is fraying, though again how much the U.S. is prepared to do concretely to bring Gaza’s devastation to an end remains unclear. Moreover, telling Israeli officials that they have limited time could create an incentive to push with more intensity and less caution during the interim. As things stand, it appears that the U.S. is pressing for operations to end in a matter of weeks – though potentially several – while Israel plans for a longer campaign.

After more than two months of intense Israeli operations, it is evident that eradicating Hamas, even as a fighting force, will be a tall order and the push to do so will destroy what is left of Gaza. Even then, the wider social and political movement will survive. So far, Hamas seems intent on throwing what it has at the battle, but at some point, it could decide to stow its weapons and melt into the population. That said, some Western officials believe that the Israeli offensive to date, combined with upgraded border security, has made sure that Hamas will not launch another attack like that of 7 October.⁶⁷ Israel argues that its inability to deter or fend off such attacks makes Hamas’s incapacitation necessary, but no repeat seems plausible, given that Israel will have learned from the intelligence and other failures that enabled that breach.

Israel’s newly devised steps to spare civilians in Gaza’s south are failing. Israeli officials argue that with smaller buildings and more open space, fighting in the south will be different from that in Gaza City.⁶⁸ The army has designated “safe zones”, mainly comprising UN facilities, a concept the UN condemns.⁶⁹ Many Palestinians avoid these places because they cannot reach them safely and conditions there are deplorable.⁷⁰ Maps Israeli has produced, which divide southern Gaza into zones to facilitate evacuations, confuse Palestinians, for whom their purpose is unclear, and who fear not receiving notification of impending strikes in time.⁷¹ Besides, Israel has previously bombed areas to which it has told Palestinians to evacuate (though it denies doing so).⁷² While Israel is reportedly looking for alternatives to big bombs

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, 4 December 2023. See also Neri Zilber, “Israel plans for ‘long war’ and aims to kill top three Hamas leaders”, *Financial Times*, 1 December 2023.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Washington, December 2023.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, November 2023.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, 5 December 2023.

⁶⁹ Julian Borger and Ruth Michaelson, “IDF instructions on Gaza refuge zones cruel ‘mirage’, aid agencies say”, *The Guardian*, 7 December 2023.

⁷⁰ Israel has also sometimes bombed UNRWA schools used as IDP shelters, arguing they are used by Hamas. Five were evacuated on Israeli orders on 6 December. “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel – Flash Update 61”, OCHA, 6 December 2023.

⁷¹ Crisis Group observations, southern Gaza, early December 2023.

⁷² Crisis Group observations, Gaza; interviews, Israeli officials, November-December 2023.

for hitting tunnels, it is hard to imagine any way of pursuing this objective without doing collateral damage. Flooding by seawater, an option under consideration, will cause environmental harm and risk killing hostages, many of whom presumably are underground.⁷³

Already proper relief work is impossible. UN aid chief Griffiths told the press on 7 December, roughly a week into the resumption of hostilities, that “no place [is] safe for civilians in southern Gaza”.⁷⁴ UN Secretary-General António Guterres took the extraordinary step of invoking Article 99 of the UN Charter, a provision allowing the Secretary-General to advise the Security Council of grave dangers to international peace and security, and asked for resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire.⁷⁵ Such a resolution, introduced on 8 December, was vetoed by the U.S., with observers calling the mood in the Council “poison”.⁷⁶

Further mass displacement seems inevitable, though there are few places left to go. Evacuating even small pockets means moving large numbers of people: more than a quarter of the Khan Younis population, totalling some 350,000 people including those already displaced, have received evacuation orders, and hundreds of thousands have made their way to Rafah, where full shelters have left people sleeping in the winter streets.⁷⁷ If Israel were to allow people to return north, large portions of it are a wasteland. More people will end up in already overcrowded UN facilities. Still more will move south, closer to the Egyptian border. Arab and Egyptian diplomats, while determined that Palestinians not leave the strip en masse, say camps for the displaced, so long as they are on the Gaza side, would not cross a red line.⁷⁸ The result will be sprawling tent cities, also with appalling conditions – in mid-October, Israel proposed one site for such a camp at al-Mawasi, a stretch of Mediterranean coastline between Deir al-Balah to the north and the Egyptian frontier to the south.⁷⁹

At least plausible is that such a scenario tips toward an exodus into Egypt. Indeed, early in the war Prime Minister Netanyahu reportedly tasked his closest adviser with preparing a plan for achieving precisely that, not through expulsion but rather through a loosening of controls on the Egyptian border to encourage immigration.⁸⁰ Arab leaders and the U.S. say such ideas are unacceptable. But Palestinians could simply force their way into Sinai as conditions in Gaza became unbearable. Or, in the face of an inevitable border breach, Cairo might accept the debt relief floated in October

⁷³ Nancy Youssef, Warren Strobel and Gordon Lubold, “Israel weighs plan to flood Gaza tunnels with seawater”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 December 2023.

⁷⁴ “UN relief chief: ‘No place safe’ for civilians in southern Gaza”, OCHA, 7 December 2023.

⁷⁵ The last occasion Article 99 was invoked was in 1971, during the war leading to the creation of Bangladesh and its separation from Pakistan. “UN chief resorts to rare Article 99 in bid to stop Israel, Hamas fighting”, VOA, 7 December 2023. Thirteen of the Council’s fifteen members voted for the resolution, with the UK abstaining.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, New York, 8 December 2023. Thirteen of the Council’s fifteen members voted for the resolution, with the UK abstaining.

⁷⁷ “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel – Flash Update 61”, op. cit. See also Stephen Kalin and Anas Baba, “The epicenter of Gaza humanitarian crisis is this border town”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 December 2023.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Cairo, November 2023.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Cairo, November 2023.

⁸⁰ See Matti Tuchfeld, “The prime minister’s plan for the citizens of the strip: Get out!”, *Israel Hayom*, 30 November 2023 [Hebrew].

and agree to host some people. Such an outcome would ratchet up Egyptian-Israeli tensions as Cairo grapples with a restive refugee population, particularly as militants among the Palestinians would probably launch cross-border attacks on Israel and form ties with insurgents in Sinai and elsewhere in Egypt.⁸¹

While Israel has not set out a post-war plan for Gaza, the probable outcome, if fighting continues – and particularly if it eventually ends not by a ceasefire agreed upon with Hamas but on Israel’s initiative alone – is military occupation, at least for some time. Israeli officials talk of a buffer zone cutting into Gaza.⁸² Palestinians would squeeze into smaller neighbourhoods or camps. Israeli raids would target Hamas leaders or fighters or perhaps try to rescue the hostages, though it seems likely that in this scenario, some would perish. No Gaza authority would exist – not for a while, anyway. The blockade would stay, so no reconstruction could occur. Palestinians probably could not use Gaza’s fertile farmland, much of which is close to Israel, or fish in waters off the coast.

Put simply, even if Israeli operations over the coming weeks can deal Hamas a more decisive blow – itself far from clear – the cost of doing so is too high. It would entail killing thousands more Palestinians – already, Israel appears to have killed as least as many children as it has Hamas militants – razing much of southern Gaza as it has the north, leaving hundreds of thousands more homeless and potentially triggering mass flight into Egypt. Netanyahu claims that Hamas’s destruction will enable the “deradicalisation” of Gaza, but the opposite is likely.⁸³ The campaign under way and its aftermath will produce new, perhaps still more tenacious forms of militancy. It has already given Hamas, increasingly out of favour in Gaza before the war, a popularity boost, not only there and in the West Bank but across the region, jangling nerves among Arab leaders.⁸⁴

As for the war’s political outcome, on its current trajectory, it is most likely to lead not to a renewal of efforts to resuscitate some sort of peace process but the fading of any political horizon. The notion, promoted in Western capitals, that destroying Hamas will eventually enable the PA’s return to Gaza and a renewed push for two states in Israel-Palestine is fanciful. Gaza’s decimation, together with Israel’s land confiscation and displacement of Palestinians in the West Bank, is forcing things in the opposite direction. In some ways, the result would be the apotheosis of Netanyahu’s longstanding strategy, articulated openly in 2019 – to isolate Gaza from the West Bank so as to prevent the respective Palestinian populations from coming together to challenge the occupation.⁸⁵ Talk of a putative day after is little more than speculation without a sense of what Gaza will look like, particularly when what in October appeared to be worst-case scenarios look ever likelier.

⁸¹ An Egyptian diplomat said: “For us, this is a national security issue. If larger numbers of Palestinians come from Gaza to Sinai, Hamas will come with them, and they would become our responsibility. This is an absolute red line”. Crisis Group telephone interview, 16 October 2023.

⁸² “U.S. would object to ‘buffer zone’ inside Gaza Strip, State Department says”, Reuters, 6 December 2023.

⁸³ “Netanyahu wants to ‘deradicalize’ Gaza through war. Is that even possible?”, NPR, 21 November 2023.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, Western diplomat, December 2023.

⁸⁵ Gidi Weitz, “Another concept implodes: Israel can’t be managed by a criminal defendant”, *Haaretz*, 9 October 2023.

VII. Ceasefire and Talks

No remotely plausible option for stopping the war is good, but some are grimmer than others. An immediate truce is imperative for ending Gaza's destruction, getting aid in and enabling a hostage-prisoner swap, though some agreement on hostage and prisoner releases might be necessary to get there. Negotiations over a longer-term ceasefire and interim arrangements would follow. There it gets harder still, notably over questions of who provides local services and, over time, who governs the strip, what parts of Gaza Israeli forces hold and for how long, whether the blockade is lifted and, of course, what happens to Hamas. No Gaza ceasefire will endure over time absent efforts to get some form of wider political track going between Israelis and Palestinians, for which the obstacles are formidable.

The priority should be a cessation of hostilities, ideally immediate, though it could require an initial hostage-prisoner exchange. Such a truce would see Israeli military operations and Palestinian rocket fire from Gaza cease, as during the late November pause. At the same time, Israel would let in humanitarian aid and basic necessities of life (including fuel), subject to checks, and permit aid to reach Gaza through Kerem Shalom, the only way to up the volume sufficiently. Talks about hostage releases would restart, through the Qatari-Egyptian-U.S. channel used before, if they had not done so already. They would focus on an "all-for-all" deal: Hamas releasing all the hostages and soldiers it holds in exchange for all Palestinians in Israeli prisons, the place to which mediators had hoped negotiations that enabled the November pause would progress.⁸⁶ Israeli officials argue that force creates conditions for freeing hostages; they say it compelled Hamas to agree to the initial releases.⁸⁷ In reality, the operations hinder efforts to get hostages out and could endanger their lives, particularly if Hamas must retrieve captives held by others.

An initial truce along these lines would be fragile and need to trigger reinvigorated efforts by diplomats to forge an agreement on a longer ceasefire and interim arrangements for Gaza. An all-for-all exchange itself may require a deal on a longer ceasefire and interim arrangements, without which Hamas may not release the soldiers it holds. Such talks will be daunting – so much so that even laying out obstacles can seem unhelpful, particularly as unexpected space could open once violence stops and some hostages are out. Still, some of the issues with which mediators will have to grapple appear evident.

Pivotal to conditions in Gaza will be how far Israel withdraws troops and what goods and material it allows in. U.S. leaders insist that Israel cannot reoccupy the strip, and Netanyahu avers that he does not want to do so, but Israeli officials still suggest that the army will not withdraw any time soon.⁸⁸ Whether Israel shuts off large tracts of the strip, including vital agricultural land, to Gaza's inhabitants or, instead, retreats to buffer zones along the border will matter. So, too, will Israel's policing of the border, particularly regarding what gets in. Without materials for construction, for example, many of which Israel considers "dual use" in that they can serve both civilian and military purposes, no rebuilding of the strip's destroyed cities

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, November-December 2023.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials, November-December 2023.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, December 2023.

and towns can happen. A continued blockade will perpetuate the strip's misery. Put simply, the further Israeli troops withdraw and the more the siege eases, the less awful conditions in post-war Gaza will be.

As for governance, it seems likely that at first the UN and humanitarian organisations will have to step in to provide services, though many fear doing so.⁸⁹ Local councils, comprising notables and former bureaucrats, might be an option, potentially even mobilising some form of local police to keep order. As part of a deal over interim arrangements, Hamas would agree to surrender any governing role, keep a low profile and not interfere, though it would have to acquiesce to local authorities, as it would need to do were a Gaza government established, whether or not that involves the PA. Hamas will reject disarming flat out, at least while Palestinians are under occupation, and it has seen its popularity among Arabs grow thanks to its use of force. But mediators might test whether, in exchange for loosened border controls, Hamas might decommission some of its weapons, even if where they would be stored, under what conditions and who would supervise them is unclear. Absent signs that Hamas is taking steps along those lines, no Israeli government is likely to allow necessary goods into Gaza, let alone lift the blockade.

A ceasefire in Gaza will not hold while Israel continues enabling settler aggression and incrementally annexing the West Bank, while infringing upon the historical Status Quo on the Holy Esplanade in Jerusalem.⁹⁰ In this light, Western policy needs to target the Israeli government, which enables settler abuses, for instance by sanctioning ministers who support annexation, not just the settlers themselves.

Some Arab and Western officials float the idea of a multinational force, though without wanting to deploy their own soldiers; obstacles to such a mission are manifold.⁹¹ Certainly, no government of any stripe seems likely to volunteer troops to secure the strip or take on Hamas. Perhaps, were Israel and Hamas to agree to a ceasefire, a monitoring force might deploy – with their agreement or acquiescence – as Israeli forces pull back. It might play a role, with Israel, in border checks. The composition would be a challenge: Israeli officials do not reject the notion of a foreign force out of hand, but they would want troops from friendly countries with which the Israeli army can coordinate.⁹² Most Arab governments seem wary of contributing, fearing that Palestinians would see their troops as abetting the occupation or even as occupiers themselves.

Any ceasefire will have to kick off serious efforts to address the occupation and wider conflict of which the Gaza war is part and parcel. Prospects for that seem almost non-existent, given the scars of the last two months and current Israeli and Palestinian politics. But no ceasefire in Gaza can endure absent a political horizon.

Only U.S. pressure can end the war, but over time Arab powers are probably better placed to spearhead a longer-term political track. That track might embed progress in talks between Israelis and Palestinians in further deals normalising Israel's relations with Arab powers, particularly Saudi Arabia. Indeed, some regional leaders believe

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian agency representatives, November-December 2023.

⁹⁰ For background on the Holy Esplanade, see Mairav Zonszein, "What's at Stake at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade?", Crisis Group Commentary, 17 January 2023.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, November 2023.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Israeli military official, December 2023.

that if a two-state solution is to remain an option, it has to be put firmly on the table now, perhaps along the lines of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.⁹³ Whatever form it takes, Palestinian elections need to happen, given the PA's legitimacy deficit.⁹⁴ Netanyahu, who has long rejected peace with the Palestinians, may well leave office, but any serious peace effort would still need to overcome an Israeli body politic that has shifted rightward and much of which is not only reluctant to restrain the settlers but actively supports them. It would need to introduce greater international accountability for Israel's de facto annexation of the West Bank and hold on East Jerusalem.

VIII. Conclusion

On its current trajectory, the war will leave Gaza and its people, already irrevocably changed, in utter ruin. It risks driving an exodus from the strip and triggering a wider regional confrontation. Israel suffered an appalling blow on 7 October, one that has shaken the nation to its core. It is unconscionable to deny or seek to legitimise Hamas's crimes, as some have done. But it is also hard to justify the retribution. Israel's assault has wiped out families, levelled neighbourhoods, driven hundreds of thousands from their homes and killed, maimed or orphaned untold numbers of children. No way out of the tragedy is good, but allowing the offensive to drag on for more weeks – let alone more months – will not make Israel or the region safer. The costs to Gaza and its people and to prospects for any hope of peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians are too high. The U.S. needs to work harder now to bring the suffering to an end.

Gaza/Tel Aviv/Washington/Brussels, 9 December 2023

⁹³ "Arab peace initiative: full text", *The Guardian*, 28 March 2002.

⁹⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *Managing Palestine's Looming Leadership Transition*, op. cit.

Appendix A: Map of Israel-Palestine



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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