

# Israel's Interest in Planning for 'The Day After'

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## COMMENTARY

TEL AVIV—Almost nine months ago, thousands of Iran-backed Hamas jihadists stormed across Israel's southwest border to massacre, mutilate, rape, and kidnap Jews, most of whom were civilians. In late October, Israel launched a major ground campaign in Gaza, which has substantially degraded Hamas' capacity to commit such mass depredations and to engage in military operations. Despite extraordinary efforts to target combatants, Israel Defense Forces have caused heavy casualties among noncombatant Palestinians and extensive destruction of Gaza's urban infrastructure. Hamas acquired moral and legal responsibility for that death and destruction owing to its reprehensible decision – carefully conceived, determinedly executed, and in flagrant violation of the international laws of war – to locate its headquarters, fighters, and arsenals among and beneath Gaza's civilian population.

The jihadists' depravity does not diminish Israel's responsibility under the international laws of war to minimize, to the extent possible consistent with eliminating the threat posed by Hamas, civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure. Nor does Hamas' moral and

legal responsibility for the carnage and devastation lessen Israel's national security interest in the stabilization, reconstruction, and provision of security for post-war Gaza.

Despite the passage of nine months, Israel seems to have made only modest progress in devising an actionable plan for "the day after" the IDF accomplishes the nation's major war aims in Gaza: dismantle and destroy Hamas' military and governing capabilities and secure the release of the 116 remaining hostages. At the annual Herzliya Conference last week, Israeli National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi stated that a process "for countries that want to see a governing alternative to Hamas in Gaza, with local leadership in Gaza" is "starting to take form now."

Why has the planning taken so long?

Some Israelis observe that the war's immediacy impedes the formulation of long-term strategy. Comparisons to the United States illuminate the point.

For the last 75 years, to report for duty on the front lines of America's wars – Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq – U.S. soldiers have had to board an airplane or ship and journey halfway around the world. Indeed, since the Union defeated the Confederacy in the American Civil War 150 years ago, American troops have for the most part traveled overseas to reach combat zones.

For Israel, war has been largely a local affair. With light traffic, IDF soldiers setting out by car from this Mediterranean beach city can reach the southern front just across the border with Gaza in less than an hour. It takes about two hours to drive to the northern front with Iran-backed Hezbollah along Israel's border with Lebanon.

Israelis experience their multi-front war with Hamas in the south and Hezbollah in the north in another way that differs dramatically from America at war. Military service in the United States is voluntary; active duty and reserve troops combined comprise less than 1% of the population. In contrast, Israel imposes mandatory military service on young men and women, and reserve duty continues until the age of 40 for soldiers and longer for officers. (Last week Israel's Supreme Court invalidated the exemption from mandatory military service enjoyed by ultra-Orthodox Jews; Arab citizens' exemption remains.) That means that a large percentage of non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish Israelis either serve in the IDF or have a child, sibling, spouse, or parent in uniform.

At this fraught moment, Israelis fear for the hostages, worry about front-line soldiers, mourn the victims of Oct. 7 and the fallen soldiers, attend to the wounded, express anxiety about the weakened economy, and expect that the low-intensity conflict with heavily armed Hezbollah will explode into a high-intensity war. So preoccupied, citizens have not demanded from the politicians and military establishment a plan for post-war Gaza.

But what about the politicians and the military establishment, not least the prime minister who leads the government? Planning for national-security contingencies is a crucial element of their job descriptions.

According to the opposition's harsh criticism, planning for post-war Gaza conflicts with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's interest in prolonging the war. Keeping the nation's focus on the fighting, critics say, enables Netanyahu to delay the country's convening of a formal state investigatory commission to hold accountable those – first and foremost the prime minister – who presided over the worst security catastrophe in Israel's history. It also, they contend, provides an excuse to postpone his testimony in his corruption trial. Furthermore, argues the opposition, Netanyahu's government depends on hard-right coalition partners, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, who reject the very idea of a day after. Instead, they envisage Israel's civilian resettlement of, and establishment of permanent Israeli rule in, Gaza.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu's defenders say that Israel's longest-serving prime minister proceeds cautiously. He prefers to weigh options, hold his cards close to his vest, and keep the nation's adversaries – and the internal opposition – guessing. As events unfold, the prime minister's camp argues, Netanyahu modifies his views. They point out that he has offered thoughts on "the day after." In December 2023, he outlined Israel's "three requisites of peace" in the Wall Street Journal: "destroy Hamas, demilitarize Gaza, and deradicalize the whole of Palestinian society." When the IDF completes its principal tasks, maintain Netanyahu loyalists, the prime minister will reveal his plans to accomplish these daunting goals.

But planning can't wait. Creating organizational structure, choosing and training personnel, raising money, drafting contracts, and more demand considerable time and effort. Whatever the complex of factors accounting for the government's refusal to articulate a full-fledged plan and stand up a team, the result is to undercut Israel's interest in stabilizing, reconstructing, and securing Gaza. That is the central argument of "Israel's War of Regime Change Is Repeating America's Mistakes," which Foreign Affairs published online in mid-June.

The article's three co-authors know a great deal about America's efforts to effect regime change in Iraq. David Petraeus, a partner at KKR, served as director of the CIA, commander of Coalition Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and commander of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). Meghan L. O'Sullivan, director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, served as special assistant to the president and deputy national security adviser for Iraq and Afghanistan. Richard Fontaine, CEO of the Center for a New American Security, worked on foreign policy in the State Department, White House, and Senate. "As the United States did in Iraq in 2003," they stress, "Israel began its war without a plan to create a governing structure, in its case to replace Hamas, and no clear blueprint has emerged after months of fighting."

The authors believe that Israel rightly resolved that Hamas must not be allowed to continue to rule Gaza. However, they warn, in the justified pursuit of regime change in Gaza, Israel is repeating “fateful strategic errors” that the United States made in Afghanistan and Iraq, “including some of the most glaring mistakes that the United States made in the early years of the Iraq war.” At the same time, Petraeus, O’Sullivan, and Fontaine counsel, Israel “can also learn from some of the successes of the American campaigns – especially those of the ‘surge’ strategy that Washington adopted in Iraq beginning in 2007.”

America’s worst error in Iraq, according to the authors, was supposing that “killing and capturing terrorists” was enough. The most important lesson for Israel is that “the key to solidifying security gains and stemming the recruitment of new adversaries is holding territory, protecting civilians, and providing governance and services to them.”

The authors recognize that Israel faces greater challenges in Gaza than did the United States in Iraq. Israel, for example, confronts hundreds of miles of tunnels under civilian populations. Its small standing army, which is designed for high-tech warfare and quick and decisive victories, is enmeshed in protracted urban fighting. And the Jewish state must balance the requirements of victory with the imperative to return the hostages. Nevertheless, assert the authors, “What is beyond dispute is that until some force, Israeli or otherwise, can clear Hamas fighters, hold territory, and build basic infrastructure and governing mechanisms in Gaza over the medium term, Hamas will very likely continue to reconstitute itself.”

Private organizations have developed worthy proposals for post-war Gaza. MIND Israel has circulated an [unpublished policy paper](#), “Turning Catastrophe into a Vision: MIND Israel 2024 National Strategy for a Post-Hamas Gaza (January 2024).” In addition, the Gaza Futures Task Force of The Jewish Institute for National Security of America and the Vandenberg Coalition (I serve on the advisory board) has made publicly available [“The Day After: Action Plan.”](#)

But it is not enough to recognize that some combination of partners – including Arab states, the United States, other nations, and NGOs and international organizations – should assist with humanitarian relief; that Israel must work with partners to ensure security; and that Israel and partners must find local Palestinians with the least ties possible to Hamas to reconstitute government in Gaza. It is also urgent to appoint officials, conduct focused diplomacy, raise funds, form and prepare operational units, craft lines of effort, and accomplish an array of related tasks.

Rigorous planning for “the day after” advances Jerusalem’s vital national security interest in stabilizing, reconstructing, and ensuring security for post-war Gaza.

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