

# Grim Lessons From Phase One of the Israel-Hamas Deal

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By Peter Berkowitz

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Last week marked 17 months since, under the cover of thousands of rockets it rained down on civilian communities in southern Israel, Iran-backed Hamas in Gaza launched a savage invasion of the Jewish state. On Oct. 7, 2023, the jihadists killed some 1,200 persons, mostly civilians, among them more than 30 Americans, and kidnapped 251 persons, mostly civilians, among them as many as 12 Americans.

By means of its surprise attack, Hamas' Gaza branch sought to draw Hamas in Judea and Samaria and Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon into a multi-front war aimed at crippling and ultimately destroying the Jewish state. Instead, by November 2024 Israel had inflicted heavy losses on both Hamas and Hezbollah and, with precision air strikes, had severely degraded Iran's air defenses and destroyed Tehran's ability to produce ballistic missiles.

Yet Gaza remains a battlefield and a nightmare. Despite Israel's extraordinary military accomplishments, Hamas still stands, and the jihadists have exploited the ceasefire that went into effect on Jan. 19 to recruit, rearm, and prepare for renewed fighting. Meanwhile, Israel continues without a concrete plan for dealing with Gaza's approximately 2 million Palestinians once major military operations end.

President Donald Trump's radical plan is not concrete, and the administration has not offered a clue about its implementation. On Feb. 4, at a televised White House press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the president startled many of his own senior staff, caught Netanyahu off guard, aroused indignation among Europeans, and rattled America's moderate Arab partners. In front of the world, the president affirmed a more extravagant version of the idea of moving 2 million Palestinians from Gaza – so that the 50,000 tons of rubble produced by the war could be removed and the territory's infrastructure could be rebuilt – than the one he first raised in a Jan. 25 telephone conversation with Jordan's King Abdullah II. Trump's staff defended the proposal, Netanyahu pocketed it, Europeans scoffed at it, and America's moderate Arab friends and partners unequivocally rejected it.

Within two weeks, despite – or because of – Trump's grandiose plan to displace Gaza's 2 million Palestinians and construct there a "Riviera of the Middle East," Egypt announced that it was working on its own plan to rebuild Gaza. The Egyptian proposal takes for granted that Palestinians will stay put and that even if they wanted to leave, other moderate Arab states, starting with Jordan and Saudi Arabia and very much including Egypt, won't take them in.

On March 4, at an Arab League summit in Cairo, “Arab leaders adopted a five-year Egyptian reconstruction plan for Gaza,” according to the Times of Israel, “that would cost \$53 billion and avoid displacing Palestinians from the enclave.” The plan envisaged the eventual handover of Gaza to the Palestinian Authority but left unclear Hamas’ role. Hamas promptly welcomed the Arab proposal. On March 6, Israel and the United States rejected it.

Meanwhile, as of March 1 when the Israel-Hamas deal’s first phase ended, 33 Israeli hostages had been released, eight of them dead, in exchange for around 2000 Palestinian prisoners, many with blood on their hands. Hamas continued to hold 59 hostages, of whom 32 Israel believes to be dead.

Discussions about the second phase, which would have included Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza and the end of the war in exchange for Hamas’ release of the remaining hostages, never commenced. Israel accepted and Hamas rejected United States Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff’s proposal for Israel to extend the phase-one ceasefire through Ramadan (Feb. 28-March 29) and Passover (April 12-20) and for Hamas to release all remaining hostages. In the absence of an agreement, Israel stopped aid to Gaza and considered resuming military action “to pressure the terror group into making further concessions.”

As Israel determines whether to return to the negotiating table or the battlefield, it grapples with the anguish stemming from the nation’s bargain with the devil. Israelis will not forget – they have trouble pushing to the periphery of their hearts and minds – the ghoulish spectacle Hamas made of the hostages’ return. The jihadists paraded abductees on stages in Gaza, turned over emaciated kidnap victims, and sent back in coffins to Israel the brutalized bodies of three members of the Bibas family – mother Shiri, and sons Ariel, who was four, and Kfir, who was not quite nine months old, when Hamas ripped them from their homes.

In “The Untold Story: How We Lost in the Negotiations Despite the Military Victory in Gaza,” Eyal Tsir-Cohen acknowledges the “great happiness steeped in anxiety and sadness” with which Israelis have experienced the ceasefire and hostages’ return. He nevertheless urges his fellow citizens to look beyond the here and now, the assignment of blame for the October 7 massacres, and the imperative to return the remainder of the hostages. A former member of Israel’s hostage-negotiation team, Tsir-Cohen brings the big picture into better focus by examining where the Jewish state went wrong in the Hamas negotiations. An improved understanding of Israel’s mistakes, he argues, enhances the nation’s grasp of, and ability to counter, the looming threats.

Four “erroneous working assumptions,” maintains Tsir-Cohen, led Israel to overestimate its capabilities.

First, Israel's political echelon and defense establishment wrongly assumed in the winter of 2024 that Israel military force would in the coming months swiftly and decisively weaken Hamas' senior leadership. Notwithstanding Israel's killing of Marwan Issa (deputy commander of Hamas' military wing) in March 2024, Mohammed Deif (Hamas military chief) in July 2024, and Yahya Sinwar (top leader of Hamas in Gaza) in October 2024, much of Hamas' core leadership fled underground – literally – and survived. This substantially diminished Israel's ability to dictate terms at the negotiating table.

Second, Israel's political echelon and defense establishment wrongly assumed that intensified fighting and mounting death and destruction in Gaza would open a rift between Hamas and the rest of the Palestinian population that would impel the people to drive out the jihadists. The error sprang from the belief that Gazans are Hamas' passive victims, prisoners of a fanatical terrorist organization. Too few on the Israeli side appreciated how thoroughly Hamas' jihadist spirit is woven into the fabric of Palestinian society and how tightly it is bound up with Gazans' identity. Add to that massive humanitarian aid flowing to Gaza during the negotiations – some 250 trucks a day – and a population whose median age is 19.5 years, and Hamas' replenishment of its ranks with young and willing Gazan recruits ceases to baffle. "In Gaza in 2025," writes Tsir-Cohen, "there is truly no bottom to the barrel of terror."

Third, Israel's political echelon and defense establishment wrongly assumed that if military pressure compelled Hamas to come to the negotiating table, Qatari and Egyptian mediators would persuade the jihadists to compromise. But, observes Tsir-Cohen, "Already by February 2024, it had become clear that even if the mediators' heads were in the West, their hearts remained in the Middle East." The Qataris and Egyptians operated with a cool and calculating professionalism, taking no sides between Hamas who wished to destroy the Jewish state and the Israelis who wished to survive and thrive. Qatar's two-facedness is well known, hosting both Hamas leadership in Doha luxury hotels and American forces at Al Udeid Air Base, "the largest US military installation in the Middle East." But Egypt's refusal to take Israel's side despite Cairo's dislike of Hamas – the Palestinian branch of Egypt's enemy, the Muslim Brotherhood – should be a stinging reminder that unlike the logic of politics elsewhere, the enemy of one's enemy in the Middle East is not necessarily one's friend.

Fourth, Israel's political echelon and defense establishment wrongly assumed that the Israeli government's excruciating 47-minute film documenting Hamas atrocities – featuring footage shot by the jihadists' GoPro cameras – would shock consciences worldwide, compelling nation-states around the globe to stand by Israel and encourage it to demolish Hamas. This, according to Tsir-Cohen, is the most painful error, and it derives in part from overestimating the Biden administration. From January 2024 a procession of intellectuals and diplomats, foremost among them from the United States, visited Israel, writes Tsir-Cohen, "with one question: 'When will you Israelis withdraw from your positions and terminate the war?'" The Biden administration was hardly alone in deploring Israel's refusal to put the cessation of hostilities ahead of defeating Hamas. "It is difficult to exaggerate the intensity, the frequency, and the urgency of the cries of pain of our allies," reports Tsir-Cohen. Hamas heard those

cries and drew the obvious conclusion. The Gaza jihadists realized that they needn't agree to painful compromises because even Israel's friends, despite the seven-front war that Iran was waging against the Jewish state, put the pressure for major concessions on Israel.

These grim lessons for Israel – about Hamas leadership's elusiveness, Hamas' power over Gazan hearts and minds, moderate Arabs' ambivalence, and international public opinions' cluelessness or rottenness – ought also to inform Trump administration thinking about the Jewish state's strategy and Gaza's future.

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