

Three Strategies for Gaza: Which Should Israel Pursue?

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Israel is grappling with three main alternative strategies for continuation of the Gaza war, aiming to achieve its declared goals: the military and governmental collapse of Hamas, the release of all hostages, and the creation of a new reality that will prevent Gaza from again becoming a base for attacks on Israel.

The supporters of each alternative strategy express absolute confidence in the righteousness of their position, alongside low attentiveness to criticism and arguments pointing to difficulties and drawbacks. It is important to examine each approach with a clear mind, with integrity, and with as few preconceptions as possible.

Strategy A: Hostage Deal and an End to the War

The first strategy calls upon the Israeli government to accept Hamas's terms for release of the hostages, including an end to the war and immediate withdrawal of the IDF from Gaza. Among the proponents of this strategy are hostage families, senior commentators, figures on the Israeli left, many in the international community, and (according to *The New York Times*) several senior IDF officers. They believe that the hostages, especially those still alive, cannot be freed by any other means, and that their fate outweighs any other consideration. They also claim that since Israel has already severely harmed Hamas and its supporters among Gaza residents, Hamas will find it difficult to rebuild its power in the near future and will not be able to repeat the October 7th attack.

Additionally, they argue, Israel will not be able to bear the burden of continued fighting for much longer and therefore should end it now. According to its proponents, this strategy will also lead to an end of the conflict on the northern border, as promised by Hezbollah, halt the erosion of international support for Israel, ease tensions with the United States, and may even advance the desired normalization with Saudi Arabia.

The practical implication of this strategy is leaving Hamas as the ruling power in Gaza, abandoning the effort to prevent it from regaining its strength as well as

the vision of de-radicalization of the Gazan population – costs that the supporters of this strategy are willing to bear. They believe that Hamas as an idea cannot be defeated and that any form of (Palestinian? local?) governing body in Gaza is preferable to Israeli rule or the chaos that will prevail in the aftermath of the war. However, the implementation of this strategy would mean that Israel is, unwillingly, declaring Hamas as the victor in the war and admitting that the decision to initiate the October 7 attack was wise and based on sound strategic thinking.

Hamas anticipated a harsh Israeli response but assumed that nevertheless it would emerge the ruling power in Gaza because Israel could not bear the cost of removing it from power. From Hamas's perspective, as seen by Iran and its proxies, the primary goal at this point is to keep Hamas in power at any cost. Hamas' victory will be seen as a huge achievement and will be translated into continued strengthening of the organization with the aim of forcing further concessions from Israel, undermining the confidence of the Zionist enterprise in its ability to exist in the heart of a hostile region, and expanding Iranian influence in the Middle East, including into Jordan and the Arabian Peninsula. Within the Palestinian system, it will mean further strengthening of Hamas and the Islamist version of the Palestinian narrative of struggle.

Strategy B: A Deal Followed by Continuous Military Pressure

Strategy B, supported by the security establishment, argues that the main effort in Gaza should be to continue military pressure on Hamas until it is completely dismantled. This involves the third phase of the war, i.e., raids and pinpoint strikes that will exact a painful price from the terrorist organization and force it to accept the hostage deal proposed by Israel and backed by the United States, the mediators, and the international community.

Supporters of this strategy see the slight flexibility in Hamas's position as proof of the validity of this argument. For Israel, they argue, the costs of continued fighting will gradually decrease while Hamas, which has already suffered a severe blow, will continue to pay heavily, including the potential targeting of its senior leadership.

Concurrently, to restore legitimacy, Israel will continue humanitarian efforts and

try to gradually promote governance structures that are not affiliated with Hamas or other terror organizations, preferably ones not tied to Fatah but without excluding them either. According to this strategy, the IDF will retain full responsibility for fighting terrorism in Gaza and will continue to maintain its presence in the Philadelphi corridor (until an arrangement is reached with Egypt to ensure no smuggling occurs) and the Netzarim corridor, as well as in the perimeter surrounding Gaza.

This strategy would leave Hamas in control of most of Gaza and its population but would allow Israel to address security risks without restrictions while not tasked with the burden of managing the civilian life in Gaza (like the situation in Palestinian Authority areas in Judea and Samaria). The IDF will then be able to allocate more resources to addressing the threat from Lebanon (if attempts to achieve an agreement through diplomatic means fail). Although this does not fully meet the expectations of the US, it may significantly mitigate disagreements with Washington.

However, there are several problems with pursuing this course of action. Firstly, it deviates from the declared goals of defeating Hamas and allows Hamas to remain in power for an extended period, inspiring hope among the Iranians and their allies that this would become the new permanent reality. The proponents of this strategy do not use the terms victory or defeat and replace them with the term “dismantle” that means making the military formations of Hamas dysfunctional.

Secondly, this approach offers only partial solution to the issue of hostages, as Hamas would have no interest in releasing all hostages without an Israeli commitment to a complete cessation of fighting and full withdrawal from Gaza (i.e., shifting to Strategy A). As such, this strategy, too, may play into the hands of Hamas and Iran, albeit to a lesser extent, and would worsen Israel’s strategic situation, with all the risks that entails.

The claim that the IDF will be capable of dealing with any emerging threat from Gaza after evacuating it, including the Philadelphi and Netzarim corridors may easily turn into empty promises. It also completely ignores a fundamental issue – the need to change the Palestinian narrative, i.e., de-radicalization (although its supporters hope that the initial criticism of Hamas in Gaza will increase as the harsh reality weighs on the residents).

Supporters of this strategy argue that Hamas is an “idea” and therefore it cannot be defeated, and in doing so they justify the limited goals set forth.

Strategy C: Defeat, Control, and De-radicalize

Strategy C, promoted by the Israeli government (and which I tend to favor), holds that once the hostage deal option has been exhausted (and either culminates with a deal that is acceptable by Israel or fails), Israel should pursue the total military and governmental defeat of Hamas, deploying significant forces to fully dismantle Hamas’s infrastructure, and replacing it temporarily with Israeli military governance, as a first stage. Once it is clear that Hamas is not returning to power, efforts will be made to transfer many of its responsibilities to Palestinian entities that are not linked to terror, and/or to an international and inter-Arab administration that will manage Gaza’s rehabilitation.

In the process, supporters of this approach hope that it will be possible to secure the release of the hostages through military pressure; and in exchange for an Israeli commitment not to harm Hamas’ leadership and remaining militants, allow them to leave Gaza safely. This strategy would improve Israel’s strategic position, severely damage the Iranian axis both among Palestinians and across the region, place Israel in a favorable position against Hezbollah, and prepare the ground for de-radicalization steps towards a long-term change in Gaza.

The problematic aspects of this strategy are its low feasibility and the high potential of damaging relations with the US and Israel’s legitimacy in the international arena. The main argument against it is that while Israel can destroy Hamas brigades, it cannot eliminate its ideology, which is deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of Gazans. It is also argued that the cost of Israeli control of Gaza to remove Hamas from power is too high, both in terms of the military force required and the casualties resulting from prolonged presence in an area full of terrorists. This would also impose heavy economic burden on the Israeli society and damage relations with the US, which has explicitly declared its opposition to Israel’s control of Gaza. Most of these claims are exaggerated in order to convince the government avoid implementing this strategy.

Conclusions

All three strategies should be taken with the utmost seriousness and deliberated respectfully and objectively by both proponents and opponents, with the

understanding that all parties seek the best result for the State of Israel. It is essential that discussion be substantive and involve as many politicians and experts as possible on military, security, home front security, economics, and foreign relations. Additionally, to ensure that the chosen strategy considers diverse perspectives and receives broad support, a national emergency government should be formed, which is clearly necessary in Israel's current predicament. The brave IDF soldiers who will implement the adopted strategy deserve no less.