

DEALING WITH TRUMP, ISRAEL, AND HAMAS: THE PATH TO PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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SUMMARY

- Since the 7 October attacks, the Israeli government has repeatedly blocked the diplomatic route to a ceasefire in Gaza that would see Israeli hostages released. Yet it has no viable plan for a ‘day after’ that could displace Hamas, which is down but not out.
- The incoming Trump administration may support Israeli maximalist ambitions that put a negotiated two-state solution permanently out of reach.
- Only a diplomatic approach can ultimately succeed to introduce new, stable governance and security arrangements in Gaza. This should involve the return of the Palestinian Authority and local structures that already exist on the ground.
- European and Arab states share a strong interest in regional stability; they can join together to present a way forward, at the heart of which should be the 2024 “Arab Vision” plan.
- Europeans should work closely with Arab states to offer the US a deal that meets Donald Trump’s goals of ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, advancing Israeli-Saudi normalisation, and securing regional de-escalation. To do so, they will need to impose greater costs on Israel to end its occupation and enable Palestinian self-determination.

A just diplomatic solution

More than one year after Hamas's 7 October attacks against Israel, the war in Gaza continues unabated, deepening the strip's humanitarian catastrophe. But while Israel has significantly weakened Hamas, killing many of its leaders and destroying a significant portion of its infrastructure, it has not accomplished its twin goals of destroying the group and freeing the Israeli hostages. With Hamas already regenerating its ranks and waging a protracted insurgency, Israel lacks a viable strategy to achieve its core objectives. Instead, it is preparing for a long stay – depopulating and destroying northern Gaza as a possible prelude to returning Israeli settlements. The incoming US administration of Donald Trump risks encouraging Israel to keep pursuing these maximalist ambitions.

Unsurprisingly, the Gaza war is not playing out in isolation. It is feeding an intensifying conflict in the West Bank where Israel is also quickly expanding its settlements and Hamas is leveraging popular Palestinian anger at Israeli actions to consolidate its domestic position. A ceasefire deal between Hizbullah and Israel reached in November 2024 offers a diplomatic window for regional de-escalation. But any progress risks being derailed by continuing violence in Gaza.

Despite agreeing to a deal in Lebanon, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and his far-right coalition remain firmly opposed to any meaningful diplomatic track in Gaza. They have repeatedly blocked ceasefire negotiations brokered by the United States, Qatar, and Egypt. The Israeli right's vision of a Greater Israel threatens chances of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict via the two-state solution. Their position will only lead to further instability.

Ultimately, only diplomacy can provide peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians – let alone secure Israel's integration in the wider region via a long-heralded normalisation deal with Saudi Arabia. The first step is to obtain a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas that secures the release of Israeli hostages. However, this is only the start. Gaza will require a new set of post-conflict governance and security arrangements predicated on the return of the Palestinian Authority (PA). None of this will be sustainable without a concerted international push to end Israel's decades-long occupation and secure Palestinian self-determination.

The new US administration may back the expansion of Israel's ethnic cleansing in Gaza and deepening annexation of the West Bank. Such a policy would deepen Israeli-Palestinian violence and inequality, and could generate a new wave of regional instability. Preventing this outcome is a vital interest for Europeans, given the risk that conflict in the Middle East poses to their own security and the way it drives domestic political polarisation. For these reasons,

they cannot afford to accept the reality of the Netanyahu-Trump vision. Instead, Europeans need to map out a viable alternative pathway and persuade Trump to join them on it.

This ambition requires intensified European coordination with Arab partners, particularly given that the latter will have far more influence with the Trump administration than European states will. Saudi Arabia will be key, as it holds direct economic leverage with, and close ties to, the Trump team, which aspires to advance the prospect of Saudi-Israeli normalisation. Europeans will need to align their efforts closely with Riyadh, which says it will not make a deal with Israel without Palestinian independence. This would send a strong message to Washington that a credible Palestinian political track is the only way to unlock its ambition to expand the Abraham accords and stabilise the region, and in doing so avoid US entrapment in further regional conflict. This will need to be accompanied by a greater European willingness to impose a real cost on Israel to end the war in Gaza and grant Palestinians their rights.

This paper assesses what a viable future for Gaza will entail. Based on extensive direct engagement with actors on the ground in Gaza and representatives from the different conflict parties, it examines the situation in Gaza in new detail and seeks to chart an alternative, more sustainable pathway towards stabilising the strip. It urges the opening of a political track that can guarantee security and rights for both Israelis and Palestinians. To this end, Europeans and Arabs will need to focus renewed joint efforts on supporting Palestinian reconciliation in order to capitalise on Hamas's willingness to step back from power in Gaza in favour of a revitalised PA. This could provide an important, if narrow, opening to alleviate the humanitarian suffering and begin implementing a positive vision for Gaza.

A dire human toll

As 7 October 2023 dawned, over 1,000 members of Hamas's military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam brigades, and later five other Palestinian armed groups, crossed Gaza's border into Israel, under the cover of a heavy barrage of Hamas rocket and mortar fire. Once in Israel, they quickly proceeded to attack Israeli military bases, towns, and a crowded music festival. The combined onslaught caught the Israeli military and security services unprepared and was the single biggest Israeli intelligence failure since Egypt's surprise offensive in 1973.

By the time the fighting had subsided, 1,189 people had been killed, a majority of them Israeli civilians, including 36 children. The groups also abducted at least 251 people, among them women and children. A subsequent United Nations commission of inquiry led by Navi Pillay, the UN former high commissioner for human rights, accused Palestinian groups of war crimes, including executing civilians and "identified patterns indicative of sexual violence"

committed by some assailants.

Israel responded with an unprecedentedly destructive six-week campaign of air strikes on the Gaza Strip followed by a ground invasion. Although the Israeli government claimed to be targeting Hamas, the civilian population has borne the brunt of its military actions. To date, over 44,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israel, with likely 70 per cent of them women and children according to the UN. With 66 per cent of Gaza's buildings either damaged or destroyed by September 2024, 1.9 million Palestinians (90 per cent of Gaza's population) are now internally displaced, with many living in makeshift tents. In November 2024, the heads of 15 UN and humanitarian organisations described the situation in northern Gaza as “apocalyptic”.

Gaza's local economy was already compromised before 7 October but has now totally collapsed, plunging the population into poverty. The situation has been further worsened by Israel's systematic targeting of Gaza's hospitals, killing of humanitarian and medical workers, strikes against camps for displaced people, and impeding of aid deliveries. This is exacerbated by its closure of the Rafah border crossing with Egypt and separation of northern and southern Gaza. The Israeli parliament's decision to ban the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which has spearheaded international relief efforts, will only compound Gaza's suffering.

The UN commission of enquiry has accused Israel of war crimes, including “starvation as a method of warfare”, extermination, murder, the forcible transfer of civilians, and sexual violence amounting to torture. In November 2024, the pre-trial chamber of the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants against Netanyahu and Israel's former defence minister, Yoav Gallant, on five charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes. Israel is also on trial at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on charges of genocide brought by South Africa. The complaint has since been joined by 14 other countries, including Belgium, Ireland, and Spain.

Meanwhile, Israeli hostages continue to languish in captivity. Israeli authorities believe only 70 hostages may still be alive. Although 105 hostages were released as part of a temporary ceasefire deal agreed between Israel and Hamas in November 2023, Netanyahu has prioritised military action to release the remainder. While Israeli security forces have had some very limited success, rescuing eight hostages in total, many more have been killed as a result of Israeli military action.

Hamas: Beaten but still fighting

After a year of unprecedented attacks on Gaza, the Israeli military claims to have dismantled Hamas's military capabilities in the strip. The group's vast tunnel network has been heavily damaged, and, while Hamas retains a number of rockets, its weapon stockpiles are severely depleted.^[1] The group acknowledges the loss of some 6,000-7,000 members from both its armed and civilian wings, and some of its most senior leaders. But any Israeli celebrations may be misplaced.^[2]

Hamas continues to survive – which underscores the limits to Israel's military-led solution to the war. The Qassam brigades have restored or preserved much of their tunnel systems, and in some cases even expanded them, while recycling unexploded Israeli rockets, bombs, and artillery shells to use as improvised explosive devices and produce new projectiles.^[3] Most of Hamas's estimated 25,000 fighters are probably still alive – many waiting out Israel's offensive in “hibernation mode” – hiding in abandoned buildings and tunnels or escaping with fleeing civilians.^[4] And the group recently deployed about 6,000 members of its reserve force, Esnad, which is made up of Hamas members or candidate members who have received basic training with light weaponry.^[5] Hamas also claims to be recruiting a “new generation” to its ranks, exploiting widespread Gazan anger and the desire for revenge against Israel.

It may be more difficult for Hamas to replace senior political and military figures, most prominently Yahya Sinwar, a mastermind of the 7 October attacks. Nonetheless, Israel believes the group has restored some of its chains of command and control in Gaza. And, having lost two top leaders in relatively quick succession, the group is now moving towards a temporary model of collective leadership to mitigate the effect of future Israeli assassinations. This comprises Muhammad Darwish as head of the Shura Council (Hamas's most senior consultative body), and the leaders of its three regional political bureaus: Khaled Meshal (External), Khalil al-Hayya (Gaza), Zaher Jabareen (West Bank); and Nizar Awadallah, the secretary-general of the political bureau.

Regardless of this external influence, Hamas's Gaza-based leadership and the Qassam brigades will exert a heavy sway over the group's internal decision-making process for the foreseeable future, with Mohammed Sinwar – the younger brother of Yahya Sinwar – set to play an increasingly important role.^[6]

Hamas's primary focus is currently on guerrilla warfare. Its fighters have organised themselves into autonomous localised cells and are launching regular ambushes and boobytraps against Israeli forces.^[7] The group's leaders claim they are well prepared for a

long battle and believe time will play in their favour. They point to the grinding impact of the war on Israel's economy and the growing pressure on an increasingly overstretched and exhausted Israel Defence Force (IDF).

Hamas militants have weathered repeated IDF incursions. Neighbourhoods like Shuja'iyya, Beit Hanoun, and Jabalia have repeatedly been declared "cleared" by the Israeli military, yet the IDF keeps returning to them. Hamas fighters go into "hibernation" mode during Israeli assaults and then quickly re-emerge to retake control once Israeli troops have left.

Hamas is also coordinating closely with other armed groups in Gaza, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad's al-Quds brigades, the Nasser Salah al-Deen brigades, and various offshoots of the Fatah al-Aqsa Martyrs brigades. They all maintain their own attacks against Israeli ground forces and some are likely also holding Israeli hostages. But even as they work together, these groups are already looking to exploit any security vacuum caused by Hamas's weakening or displacement to strengthen their own domestic positions.

Gaza also has a number of tribal clans, like Dughmush and al-Aqra', which until now have been kept in check by Hamas. They are using the insecurity to rearm. A former PA minister who is currently liaising between international NGOs, businessmen, and Israeli authorities on getting aid into Gaza describes how: "when the Israeli army raids an area and kills militants, they leave behind the AK-47s on the bodies of those killed, and then clan and gang members find and take those guns after the army leaves." [8]

Gaza's governance under attack

Even as Israel has focused on targeting Hamas's military capabilities it has also sought to dismantle Hamas's governance structures. Israel has systematically targeted civilian officials from Gaza's ministries and municipalities. But Israel has also prevented the PA from returning to Gaza, contributing to a wider breakdown of public services and rising lawlessness.

Gaza's local police force has been hit especially hard even though it is separate from Hamas's military wing. This comes despite Israel having vetted and cleared the majority of civil servants (including police officers) to receive Qatari-funded salaries. This was agreed as part of the ceasefire understanding reached between Hamas and Israel in 2018 through Egyptian-Qatari mediation to alleviate socioeconomic pressure on the strip.

Israeli attacks are not just targeting Hamas members. Some of Gaza's civil servants belong to the group, but many are affiliated with other Palestinian factions or are politically

independent. Members of the police force are similarly a mix of Hamas members, former members of the PA security forces, and politically independent Gazans recruited in the police's annual call for applications. The primary exception to this is Hamas's Internal Security Force in Gaza, which specialises in counterespionage, capturing collaborators, and silencing critics.

Israel has regularly struck policemen as they work to protect aid trucks, further hindering the distribution of aid. Though Israel claims to be preventing Hamas from looting humanitarian aid, IDF soldiers regularly stand by as gangs loot aid trucks, extort protection fees from drivers, and block aid shipments in areas under Israel's control in Rafah. [9]

Despite this targeting by Israel, the Hamas-controlled government remains partially active, paying symbolic salaries to its employees, supervising some markets, regulating prices, and running what is left of the health sector.^[10] The civil police also continues to operate in parts of the strip like Deir al-Balah and Nuseirat, although they are unable to patrol the streets in uniforms or official vehicles due to the threat of targeted assassinations by Israel. From time to time, Hamas security personnel and militants crack down on looters and robbers, subjecting them to public beatings and torture, in addition to attacking vocal critics of the group.

Municipalities remain operational throughout Gaza as well. These are independent of the Hamas central government, and some local workers are even fierce critics of the group. Over the past year, Gaza's municipalities have worked with the PA, UN agencies, international organisations, and local civil society groups to provide basic services, such as water, sewage, and waste management and to reopen damaged or blocked streets. Despite this, municipal workers have been regularly targeted and killed by Israel.

The Israeli attacks on Gaza's governance and law enforcement structures have caused law and order and local services to break down, leading to increased theft, bank robberies, murders, armed family clashes, and domestic violence. As one source in southern Gaza put it in May: "Every day, you see a brawl on the street every few metres, every few minutes". [11] Another source in Deir al-Balah said in September: "the gunfire is constant ... clashes between families. They fire at each other all the time. But as soon as the IDF reaches an area, all those guns disappear, and none are pointed at Israeli soldiers". [12]

Local emergency committees and civic mobilisation

In response to Israel's targeted campaign against Gaza's government and municipalities, some local administration has fallen to grassroots emergency committees. These have emerged as a

resilient ad hoc form of bottom-up governance to manage day-to-day life in Gaza. They are composed of representatives from the government's ministries and civil police as well as representatives from virtually all Gazan political factions, in addition to volunteers and community and tribal leaders. Over the past months, the committees have engaged extensively with the UN to coordinate the distribution or safeguarding of international aid.

But Israel has also repeatedly targeted emergency committees. The most telling event occurred in March 2024 after the emergency committees – in coordination with UNRWA, other UN agencies, tribal leaders; and with Israel's knowledge – succeeded for the first time since the start of the war in securing the passage of 13 aid trucks from the Netzarim corridor to Jabaliya in the very north of Gaza. The day after, Israel assassinated several high-profile members of the emergency committees involved in the coordination effort and raided al-Shifa hospital where they had established their central presence. While Israel presented this as a targeted operation against a Hamas command centre, it was in fact attacking committee members who had been meeting with UN officials there to facilitate aid deliveries with Israeli approval.[13]

A year of ceasefire negotiations

As Gaza's collapse has accelerated, international efforts to end the fighting have repeatedly fallen short. Although US secretary of state Antony Blinken quickly set out US conditions for durable peace and security in Gaza (including Palestinian-led governance and no forcible displacement of Palestinians), the US and European governments spent the first four months of the Gaza war opposing a ceasefire. However, a shift in positions occurred as domestic pressure grew and the US and other Western states began to conclude that Israel had accomplished all it could from a military perspective. This culminated in a first UN Security Council resolution passed on 25 March 2024 calling for an immediate ceasefire and the unconditional release of hostages.

Throughout the spring of 2024, the US-sponsored Qatari-Egyptian mediation produced a ceasefire proposal of three phases that would see the gradual release of all Israeli hostages over an 18-week period. This was to be in exchange for releasing Palestinian detainees and prisoners currently held in Israeli prisons and the incremental, full withdrawal of Israeli forces from the entirety of Gaza.

By early April 2024, the mediators had a ceasefire text that incorporated these principles, which Israeli and Hamas negotiators both agreed to in large part, with only a few outstanding issues to resolve. This included the number and names of Palestinian prisoners that Israel would free as part of the deal and how many of the 33 Israeli hostages released in the first

phase would be alive.

However, the Israeli government continued to undermine the negotiations through its repeated vow to resume fighting once Hamas freed the remaining hostages; in contrast, Hamas demanded a permanent end to the fighting. When the group endorsed a ceasefire deal on 5 May that would have included the release of all Israeli hostages, the Israeli government then greenlit the invasion of Rafah – thus torpedoing talks.

On 31 May, President Joe Biden tried to move things forward by presenting what he described as the outlines of an Israeli ceasefire proposal. (In fact, the principles set out by Biden also reflected positions put forward by Hamas in the 5 May ceasefire deal.) Biden's points were subsequently enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 2735 on 10 June.

In doing so, Biden sought to articulate the basis for an Israeli victory narrative that could give Netanyahu a diplomatic exit from the war. However, Netanyahu soon rejected Biden's speech as "not [an] accurate" reflection of Israeli positions. Rather than increasing the pressure on Israel, the US government backed off, and blamed Hamas for the deadlock – even though the Islamist group had quickly accepted Biden's proposal and the UN resolution.

After another hiatus, over the summer the US administration made a further attempt to reach a deal. This new diplomatic initiative culminated in a slightly amended ceasefire text agreed by both Israel and Hamas negotiators on 2 July.^[14] All that was missing was the Israeli government's final sign-off.

But Netanyahu once again collapsed the talks, demanding Israel's retention of the Netzarim corridor (named after a former Israeli settlement located there), which divides northern and southern Gaza, and the Philadelphia corridor, which runs along the Egyptian border. These demands represented a hardening of Israel's position in a way that was a clear non-starter for Hamas and, according to Israeli security officials, not actually important from a military point of view.

Rather than push back against what was clearly another deliberate effort by Netanyahu to stymie negotiations, the Biden administration once again backed off. It indicated it would incorporate Netanyahu's new demands into a future US bridging proposal. Predictably, Hamas refused to engage in further US-mediated talks, saying that it would only discuss the 2 July proposal.

This was followed by Israel's assassination of Ismael Haniyeh on 31 July, Hamas's chief negotiator in ceasefire talks. Haniyeh was keen to achieve a ceasefire deal and was one of the few leaders inside the group able to exert pressure on Sinwar to compromise. His killing thus

removed a strong advocate for a ceasefire agreement and an important counterbalance to Sinwar.

Sinwar's killing in turn on 16 October was heralded by the US as an opportunity to finally reach a Gaza ceasefire deal. In reality, his death did not alter the group's long-standing demands. But it made any future deal more difficult to reach and implement on the ground given Hamas's increased decentralisation within Gaza. In the absence of a strong unifying figure, moderate figures will struggle to counter-balance Hamas hardliners keen on continued armed resistance.[15]

With a full deal still out of reach, on 27 October Egypt's president, Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, proposed a short truce, in which four Israeli hostages would be released in exchange for a number of Palestinian detainees, an increase in humanitarian aid, and the resumption of ceasefire negotiations. Netanyahu promptly rejected the proposal, arguing it would give Hamas "respite" and insisting negotiations "take place only under fire". At the same time, Hamas reiterated its long-held opposition to anything less than a permanent end to the war and a full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

Prospects for a future ceasefire

Reaching a negotiated end to the fighting through a ceasefire agreement remains the best and likely only way to free all Israeli hostages and address Gaza's underlying socioeconomic crises. The entry point for this remains the 2 July proposal, to which Hamas and Israeli negotiators (though not Netanyahu) agreed. The conclusion of a separate Israel-Hizbullah ceasefire agreement on 26 November has put pressure on Hamas and made it more flexible, including on transitional arrangements, suggesting for instance an incremental Israeli withdrawal from the Philadelphia corridor.[16] But, while the group has indicated its openness "to discussing all ideas and proposals that lead to the end of the war", there is no sign it will abandon its core demands, including the return of displaced Gazans to the north, and an end to the war, and Israeli withdrawal.[17]

Since October, the US has been pressing Qatar to expel the group's leaders from Doha. The United States' intention is to pressure the group, and as one former Israeli senior security adviser described: "attempt to rewrite history and blame Hamas rather than Netanyahu for the obstruction of ceasefire talks." [18]

Their eviction from Qatar would leave Hamas leaders with only a few other places to go, such as Algeria or Yemen. This would constrain Qatar's role in mediation efforts, which has been key to maintaining dialogue channels, while handing a new host country increased influence

over the movement and the future course of negotiations in a way that may run counter to Western policy goals. For this reason, Trump officials have communicated their desire to keep Hamas officials in Doha in a bid to reach a ceasefire deal by the time they take office.

Hamas's relocation from Doha would also complicate diplomatic engagement with the moderate political wing of the movement – to the benefit of hardliners in Gaza. A senior Hamas figure explained that many of the group's leaders from the Gaza branch are “delighted” by the prospect of shutting down the Doha office and forcing leaders of the external wing “out of luxury”. They believe such a move would persuade the external wing to be even more supportive of armed actions than diplomacy. [19]

Ultimately, however, any progress will require sustained pressure on Netanyahu even more than on Hamas. While they continue to blame Hamas for the impasse in talks, even US officials recognise that Netanyahu's entrenched opposition to Palestinian rights remains a core obstacle to a ceasefire in Gaza. As one senior Arab official involved in ceasefire talks put it: “Israel needs to be dragged kicking and screaming into a ceasefire.” [20]

Many Israelis, including those on the negotiating team, also accuse Netanyahu of deliberately undermining talks. A widely held explanation in Israel is that Netanyahu, who is currently on trial for corruption and fraud, has calculated that his political (and personal) future depends on prolonging the Gaza conflict. A ceasefire would risk bringing down the Israeli government given the fervent refusal of his far-right coalition partners to strike a deal with Hamas. This could precipitate early elections which the ruling right-wing coalition would lose despite improvements in Netanyahu's own domestic standing – due in part to Israel's killing of senior Hamas and Hizbullah leaders.

Growing pressure at home, combined with Trump's return to the White House, could persuade Netanyahu to draw down the fighting in Gaza. According to a recent poll, 71 per cent of Israelis now support a deal to return the hostages in exchange for ending the war in Gaza. In addition, continuing the war in Gaza comes with significant challenges, including rising Israeli military casualties and a contracting economy which has been battered by over a year of war and the mobilisation of large swathes of Israeli society. In May, the Bank of Israel estimated that the cost of the war would total \$66 billion – equivalent to 12 per cent of Israel's GDP.

However, in the absence of a negotiated deal with Hamas and an agreed international plan for Gaza's future governance and security, the risk is that, even if there is a ceasefire, the next US administration could end up giving Netanyahu diplomatic cover to impose a new dystopian reality that will deepen Palestinian humanitarian suffering. This would perpetuate the very

cycle of unrest Israel seeks to control. While Trump has reportedly conveyed to Israel his desire to see a hostage ceasefire deal by the time he resumes his presidency on 20 January, he and his top advisers have called for Israel to be allowed to finish the job and eradicate Hamas. The next US administration also appears set to reprise Trump's 2020 plan for ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a Palestinian state-minus comprised of disconnected Bantustans in the West Bank and Gaza.

From war to ethnic cleansing

Rather than a ceasefire, the more likely near-term prospect is a further deterioration of the situation as Israel attempts to consolidate its presence in Gaza. With the Netanyahu government continuing to oppose a deal, Israel is drifting towards a new phase in its war of attrition in the strip. It now seems that Israel wants to transform Gaza from a war zone into a security zone to facilitate long-term Israeli control. Speaking to hostage families in October, Gallant shared a similar assessment: “There’s nothing left in Gaza to do. The major achievements have been achieved ... I fear we are staying there just because there is a desire to be there.” At present, the Israeli military appears to be pursuing two convergent strategies as it prolongs its stay – the combined effect of which will be to make conditions in Gaza even worse.

Firstly, the IDF is pursuing a “five fingers” strategy which aims to fragment Gaza into small, isolated, and overcrowded enclaves. Key to this is the establishment of broad Israeli “corridors” with Israeli checkpoints to control Palestinian movement and serve as a launchpad for regular Israeli raids into the rest of Gaza. [21] This would in effect replicate the way Israel has sought to control the West Bank through its territorial fragmentation. These corridors require the large-scale demolition of Palestinian homes, mass displacement, and the construction of new Israeli infrastructure – including water, sewage, and electricity networks and widening roads to potentially serve future Israeli settlements according to an investigation by Israel’s *Haaretz* newspaper.



Secondly, Israel has begun implementing the “generals’ plan” to forcibly depopulate northern Gaza. According to a senior IDF officer involved in the operation, the task is “to create a cleansed space”. To achieve this, Israel is using a combination of violence, starvation, and

mass incarceration and deportation, before targeting all those who remain, even if they are civilians. As Moshe Yalon, another former Netanyahu defence minister, has warned: “the path we are being dragged down is one of occupation, annexation and ethnic cleansing.” This assessment has been echoed by Human Rights Watch.

There are growing signs that Israel is eyeing permanent expulsion in some areas of northern Gaza as a prelude to the re-establishment of Israeli settlements – which were dismantled following Israel’s withdrawal from the Strip in 2005. This was a longstanding demand of the settler movement even before the current war and is attracting increasing support from Israeli ministers and Knesset members.

Prominent settler leaders claim to have recruited 700 families “who are ready right now” to return to Gaza; these leaders have already visited a prospective site in the north of Gaza. Short of a formal decision by the government, it is possible that Israeli authorities could turn a blind eye to settlers taking over depopulated lands in northern Gaza to establish settlement outposts under IDF protection – as they have done in the West Bank. [22]

Israel’s security establishment has indicated it might eventually allow heavily restricted and limited return of some vetted Gazans to “humanitarian bubbles” in specific parts of Gaza. These experimental “bubbles” could be repeated across the strip – divided into 24 administrative districts. Policing and aid distribution in each zone would fall to foreign contractors or local figures with ties to Israel, while the IDF would maintain military and security control, until a joint international counterinsurgency force agrees to take over. [23] What would remain of Palestinian society in such a scenario would be barely viable. Gazans would effectively be caged in, with no ability to pursue any semblance of normal life and left wholly reliant on humanitarian aid.

Additionally, prominent Israeli ministers and Knesset members, including from Netanyahu’s Likud party, are promoting the idea of pushing Gazans to leave the enclave for Europe and other destinations. On the other side, there is increased desperation among many of Gaza’s most resourceful youth to escape once the borders open, to join the 100,000 who have managed to leave since 7 October 2023. [24]

These Israeli plans could very well receive the support of the next Trump administration. Trump’s 2020 plan sought to formalise a similar reality in the West Bank predicated on Palestinian fragmentation and Israeli settlements. Netanyahu’s appointment of Yechiel Leiter, a settler from Hebron who was once active in the Jewish Defence League (which is designated as a terrorist organisation by the US), as his new ambassador to Washington is highly indicative of the Israeli government’s hopes with Trump. The president-elect appears

to have reciprocated through the appointment as the next US ambassador to Israel of Mike Huckabee – a strong advocate of Israeli annexation of the West Bank and the forcible displacement of Palestinians.

Israel's search for a Gaza 'subcontractor'

Even as it consolidates its hold over Gaza, Israel's security establishment has no desire to administer Gaza's civilian population itself. As the Israeli finance minister Bezalel Smotrich explained in late October: "IDF soldiers don't have to ladle out soup. The IDF will create a 'sterile' area in which Hamas doesn't exist, secure it, and ensure aid gets into this point. There, international aid organisations, foreign companies, or all kinds of moderate international bodies can do it together, along with re-educating the Arab society there."

While the PA and UNRWA have provided crucial services in the West Bank, the Israeli government refuses to countenance their presence in Gaza. This is despite the PA being the only body that can legitimately take over Hamas's governance responsibilities in the Strip and secure a viable pathway towards stability and humanitarian relief. Israeli officials are instead looking to new actors to take responsibility for Gaza. But their search for a 'subcontractor' that is both willing and able to do so has so far proved fruitless

Arab states

Israeli officials have mooted a post-conflict role for Arab states to oversee Gaza's governance and security. The US has sought to leverage this as a catalyst for a ceasefire deal. But together with other Arab countries, Saudi Arabia has continued to make clear that a ceasefire and an "irreversible, irrevocable" path to Palestinian statehood remain indispensable conditions for any future involvement in Gaza. Even with the promise of a substantial package of US incentives, including support for Saudi nuclear energy and access to advanced American weaponry, these remain two key Saudi requirements for a normalisation deal with Israel.

While Netanyahu has hyped prospects of an Arab role in Gaza and a Saudi peace deal, in part to deflect domestic criticism of his handling of the war, he has steadfastly refused to offer any concessions in relation to Gaza and Palestinian rights. He may hope that realities on the ground could force Arab engagement at no cost to him. Israeli officials have been pushing the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to administer Gaza once a ceasefire has been achieved in the belief that Abu Dhabi will be willing to engage without the need for Israeli concessions in support of Palestinian rights.

Although the Emiratis have signalled their willingness to deploy troops in Gaza as part of a

joint international force, they continue to publicly condition this on a ceasefire and the establishment of a Palestinian state. The UAE has also rejected Israel's requests to bankroll a "temporary military government" in Gaza on its behalf because "we're not a bank."

Mohammed Dahlan

A senior Palestinian leader, Mohammed Dahlan, has also been floated in Israeli discussions as a "temporary solution for security control ... that all parties can live with." The former head of the PA's Preventive Security force in Gaza was entrusted with cracking down on Hamas before the group took over the strip in 2007. During that time he developed strong ties with the US and Israeli intelligence agencies. Dahlan currently resides in Abu Dhabi and is closely associated with UAE ruler Muhammad bin Zayed. Thanks to his connections Dahlan has emerged as a powerful opponent to the PA president, Mahmoud Abbas, leading a breakaway Fatah faction, the Democratic Reform Bloc.

Dahlan has been playing an active role since the conflict began. Early on in the war, he helped Palestinian businessmen get their money out of Gaza, which boosted his local standing and gave him access to increasingly scarce cash. With strong Emirati backing, this has allowed him to send humanitarian aid and cash into the strip, which he has used to grow his patronage and support networks.[25]

From Israel's perspective, Dahlan may seem like the perfect answer to its Gaza dilemma. However, the PA would strongly reject any role for him in Gaza given Abbas's deep animosity towards him. And it is unlikely that Dahlan or his Emirati patron would want to overtly move against the PA at this stage in a way that would be perceived as doing Israel's bidding and deepening internal Palestinian divisions – all of which would undermine his claim to future national leadership.

Moreover, Dahlan is unlikely to play any formal role in Gaza without the acquiescence of Hamas. His political allies have held several meetings with senior Hamas officials since the start of the war to discuss day after scenarios and arrangements for reconstruction, governance, and humanitarian relief. These political calculations – which favour engagement with Hamas to further his own Palestinian domestic standing – mean he is unlikely to make a deal with the Israeli government to suppress the group.

A clan-based solution

Another option that Israel has been pursuing is the courting of prominent families and clans in Gaza to run "Hamas-free zones", distribute aid, manage Gaza's day-to-day governance and security

, and coordinate reconstruction. In March, the IDF suggested arming clans to challenge Hamas. This includes the Dughmush, a clan affiliated with the Islamic State group (ISIS), which has repeatedly attacked Israel and was responsible for kidnapping BBC journalist Alan Johnston in 2007. It has more recently earned a reputation for looting international aid.

In its effort to circumvent Gaza's local administration and UN agencies, Israel has enlisted three private Palestinian companies to deliver aid by truck. These in turn pay off three Gazan clans – the Shuhaibar, Aqel, and al-Shirafi – to provide security for the vehicles in the form of “local thugs”, some of whom have alleged ties to jihadist groups. [26] This happens with the full knowledge of Israel and Hamas, with the latter allegedly receiving a cut from these operations.[27]

Despite this, Israeli plans to use the clans to displace Hamas and administer Gaza on its behalf have failed to gain traction. Some of the families Israel reached out to refused to collaborate out of principle or fear of Hamas retaliation. Others were expressly threatened and attacked by Hamas, or killed by Israel after they refused to cooperate.

Abu Salman al-Mughani, the head of the tribal leaders committee – a coalition of community leaders – has indicated that the clans do not have the will or capacity to replace the Hamas government. But he has said they would be willing to work jointly with the PA and Hamas to contribute to Gaza's governance and security.

Foreign contractors

Given the lack of appetite among Arab states and Gazan clans to work on its behalf, Israel has touted the idea of deploying foreign contractors to run humanitarian and civilian affairs in northern Gaza and at the Rafah border crossing with Egypt. Over the past months, two companies, Orbis Consulting and Global Delivery Company, have been competing for a role in Gaza to create “gated communities” free from Hamas. Global Delivery Company has ties to the US and Israeli security establishments and proposes to deploy heavily armed mercenaries in coordination with the Israeli army to forcibly control the local population. [28] Those Gazans wishing to receive aid would have to submit their biometric data to ensure they are not affiliated with Hamas.

However, it is still unclear who would fund such an expensive and legally problematic endeavour – although Israeli officials have reportedly mentioned the UAE as a potential donor. And, of course, they would also be prime targets for Hamas, which has vowed to go after them.[29]

The marginalised Palestinian Authority

The Israeli government continues to strongly oppose the return of the PA to Gaza, along with any prospect of wider Palestinian political reunification. Netanyahu has long seen this as a means of blocking any attempt to “ram down our throats a Palestinian state”.

For Abbas this is not necessarily an immediate problem. Although he has long wanted to restore PA control over Gaza, Abbas does not appear to be in any rush to assume responsibility for a devastated and violent strip. As one senior member of Abbas’s Fatah party remarked in March 2024: “who wants to deal with a territory that is levelled?” [30] With both Israel and Hamas facing significant internal challenges, the president apparently believes time will work to increase his leverage over both sides, allowing him to extract better terms as his opponents become weaker. [31]

While Hamas has repeatedly indicated its willingness to forgo governance of Gaza and accept the return of the PA in some capacity, Abbas continues to demand that it also cede full security control. [32] He also perceives any engagement with Hamas as a liability that could lead to further Israeli and Western financial pressure on the PA. [33]






Abbas also has little desire for PA security forces to directly confront Hamas in Gaza, which could lead the Islamist group in turn to more directly challenge his rule in the West Bank. [34] An attempt by the head of the Palestinian General Intelligence Service, Majed Faraj, to secretly deploy PA security forces in areas of northern Gaza cleared by Israel in March was foiled by Hamas, resulting in the deaths of several PA agents. [35] Being seen to overtly align with Israel would risk a public backlash. The PA is already massively unpopular among Palestinians, who view it as increasingly little more than an Israeli collaborator.

Even with a possible influx of European and Arab funding to support the PA’s return to Gaza, Abbas will remain cautious without an Israeli commitment to an accompanying political track in support of Palestinian rights, or at the very least significant international moves in support of Palestinian statehood. In this regard, Trump’s renewed offer of a Palestinian state-minus in Gaza and parts of the West Bank is unlikely to be enough to persuade Abbas. Israel will also have to give the PA the means to function not just in Gaza but also in the West Bank – by returning confiscated tax revenues, as well as by ending its military incursions into West Bank cities and preventing unchecked settler violence.

A European role: Mapping out a viable 'day after' for Gaza

Faced with the desperate situation on the ground, Israeli obstructionism, and a lack of viable options for what comes next, European states need to urgently work to create the conditions for successful ceasefire negotiations and a positive vision for Gaza’s future. To date, Europeans have spent the war offering numerous statements but have ultimately been wholly marginal to political talks and contributed very little to bringing the conflict to an end, despite mobilising €988m to support Palestinian humanitarian needs. In fact, European countries such as Germany have actively sustained the war in Gaza and Netanyahu’s rejection of a viable ceasefire deal by supporting Israeli actions and increasing weapons deliveries (which stood at €326.5m of German weapons sales in 2023 – a tenfold increase from the previous year).

Top arms exporters to Israel. In millions US dollars

	2022	2023	2024*
 United States	4.5k	3.6k	3.8k
 Germany	32	326.5	94.1
 France	70.6	30	Suspended
 United Kingdom	50.4	21.9	Partially suspended
 Italy	17	13.7	Suspended

*Data for 2024 are incomplete

Source: ECFR research based on media reporting
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This state of affairs is now doing long-term damage to European countries’ standing in the Middle East and raises questions about the European Union’s credibility as an international actor.[36] Speaking in July, Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan warned: “Gaza is one of those test cases. We are all watching. We are all evaluating whether Europe has a unified stance towards the principles it espouses.” This is a test that Europeans cannot afford to fail.

Although their options will be restricted by Israeli violence and obstructionism, Europeans

should already be laying the groundwork for a viable day after plan for when a ceasefire is finally achieved. Laying this groundwork in itself may be a critical element of securing a ceasefire. They should take this forward in close partnership with Arab states already aligned behind this vision. A joint mobilised push by the European and Arab blocs now represents one of the few means to break out of the current deadlock. Together they could press the Trump administration to temper or even block Netanyahu's maximalist policies.

Relief and rehabilitation

The first priority has to be meeting the immense humanitarian needs on the ground. According to an assessment by the UN Development Programme in May 2024, reconstructing Gaza will cost \$40 billion and take 16 years. The price tag has risen further following substantial destruction in Rafah and northern Gaza. International and Arab donors will, however, be reluctant to fund reconstruction until there is a clear political track in place to prevent a return to fighting.

In the meantime, Gaza needs Europeans to press for an immediate humanitarian funding package to restore critical services, including reopening blocked roads, removing rubble, and fixing drainage networks.

The implementation of this pathway could be supported by reactivating the PA's long dormant 37,000 civil servants, who are already in Gaza and who can facilitate this work. A stepped-up PA role could potentially allow the resumption of the electricity supply to Gaza through Egypt (which used to provide Gaza with about 15 per cent of its electricity) by giving Cairo a partner it can work with. The PA could also incorporate the local emergency committees under its umbrella given that they are currently the most effective humanitarian coordinator on the ground. This approach would help the PA gradually rebuild its presence and legitimacy in Gaza – an important political step given the degree to which it has been marginalised and discredited.

But separate funding will need to be earmarked for Gaza's independent municipalities, which are in "critical" need of funding and fuel. [37] International donors must also continue fighting to prevent the financial collapse of UNRWA given its status as Gaza's main humanitarian lifeline, a critical provider of public services, and third largest employer.

As part of this approach, European states will need to cooperate with Arab countries and other global partners to exert the necessary diplomatic pressure on Israel to end its targeting of humanitarian personnel (including UNRWA staff and civil defence teams) and stop obstructing aid deliveries. This should include broadened support for Norway's move to hold Israel to account at the ICJ

for preventing aid distribution.

Governance

The success of a humanitarian relief plan will depend on the presence of a unified and inclusive PA that benefits from cross-factional support. The PA needs to be able to extend its governance umbrella to Gaza, replace Hamas's security role, and end Israel's 17-year blockade of the strip. Hamas will need to acquiesce to this, given its continued dominant role on the ground. But the group has repeatedly signalled that it wants to step away from governance responsibilities and would therefore accept the PA's return under certain conditions. It has demanded either the formation of a new technocratic government of national unity or, failing that, a transitional and politically independent administrative committee to run Gaza under the supervision of the PA (or the Palestine Liberation Organisation – PLO – in its capacity as the internationally recognised representative of the Palestinian people).[38]

Some limited progress has already been achieved in this direction. During a meeting held in Beijing in July 2024, Palestinian factions including Hamas formally stated their commitment to a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders and the formation of an interim national consensus government made up of independent technocratic figures. In follow-up talks held in Cairo in October, Palestinian groups agreed to the establishment of a “Community Support Committee” under the PA's auspices to oversee Gaza's rehabilitation and governance functions. This could also provide a badly needed solution to the Rafah border crossing, which Israel has not reopened since Israel shut it in May 2024.

With this in mind, Europeans should now press for two things: firstly, Abbas must sign a presidential decree formally establishing the Community Support Committee; secondly, Israel should accept the deployment of a PA security force to reopen the crossing, potentially with the support of the EU's Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM Rafah) based on the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access – something that Hamas has indicated support for. [39]

Even as Europeans work towards the return of a central and unified Palestinian government to the strip, they should focus on preserving Gaza's existing governance structures with a view to eventually incorporating these into the PA. This includes Gaza's municipalities and Hamas's 42,000-45,000 civil servants. Retaining them is a Hamas condition for accepting the PA's return, and will also help avoid further societal upheaval and insecurity along the lines of the United States' catastrophic policy of de-Baathification after it invaded Iraq.

Stepping back further, European must not lose sight of the need for wider PA revitalisation to

ease the authority's return to Gaza. European efforts to stave off its financial collapse and promote institutional reforms have so far missed the mark. In July 2024, the EU conditioned its offer of \$436m in emergency funding for the PA on the authority ending payments to the families of Palestinian “martyrs and prisoners” (those killed and detained by Israel) and on the removal of alleged incitement against Israel in Palestinian textbooks.

Europeans' goal of strengthening the PA and returning it to Gaza would be better served deploying their political and financial levers to increase the PA's domestic legitimacy. Besides ending Israeli sanctions and settler violence and providing the PA with a credible political pathway towards independence, this will require Abbas also to: restore judicial independence; tackle human rights abuses by PA security forces; loosen restrictions on political mobilisation; advance national reunification; and hold long overdue elections, starting with municipal elections in Gaza when conditions allow.

These are important steps if Palestine is ever to escape the duopoly that Hamas and Fatah currently impose over domestic power. This situation harms political plurality and long-term prospects of rebooting the Palestinian national movement in a way that could produce a more representative and credible leadership in line with European interests.

Security

A ceasefire will require Hamas to end its attacks on Israel and prevent other groups from doing so – as it has done in the past. For its part, Israel will have to cease military operations in Gaza, including its campaign of targeted assassinations of Hamas figures. The domestic security needs of Gazans will also need to be ensured, including through a local police force that benefits from public support to maintain law and order.

After its 2007 takeover, Hamas played an effective role in maintaining internal security and constraining other armed groups in Gaza, including Salafi jihadist groups linked to ISIS. Removing Hamas without a suitable replacement would produce even more insecurity as rival factions, jihadist groups, and criminal gangs exploit the vacuum.

Having endured Israel's military onslaught, Hamas will remain the strongest Palestinian actor on the ground with the ability to violently oppose any security arrangement that it considers a threat to its core interests. Yet none of Israel, the PA, the US, or European powers will accept any post-conflict security arrangements that leave Hamas in control of Gaza's day-to-day security.

Remobilising the 15,000 members of Hamas's police force under PA leadership could offer a compromise way forward to restore law and order and enforce a future ceasefire. This

solution could be acceptable to both Hamas and the PA, as well as to pragmatists within the Israeli security and military institutions. However, this will have to clearly exclude all individuals who participated in the 7 October attacks.

Disarming Hamas and the Qassam brigades

It will be a far greater challenge to dismantle the Qassam brigades, Hamas's military wing, as demanded by Israel and the US. But there may be some scope to at least force Qassam fighters into "hibernation" mode in Gaza whereby they would largely disappear from public view and not challenge PA security forces. Some Hamas officials have also indicated an openness to merging their militants with a Palestinian national security force. Others have hinted they could accept limitations on the group's military capabilities as part of a post-conflict ceasefire deal, such as temporarily pausing the development of offensive weaponry like long-range improvised projectiles that could reach Tel Aviv. [40]

Europeans should further explore and test these ideas via Arab interlocutors with the group. Their goal should be to find ways towards a security outcome that could be viable on the ground and compatible with Israeli and international demands. Such steps by Hamas would, however, be contingent on positive transformation in Gaza, including the beginning of significant reconstruction and the continuous easing of Israeli border restrictions.

However, so long as Israel's occupation and subjugation of Palestinians continues in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Hamas has made clear it will not disarm fully. Over the past months it has claimed a shooting attack against an Israeli bus in the West Bank's Jordan Valley, another shooting attack that killed seven people in Tel Aviv, and a failed suicide bombing, also in Tel Aviv. Even with a ceasefire in Gaza, it may continue to incite attacks, but not order and direct them.

Nevertheless, Hamas could be encouraged towards greater moderation, including pausing its use of armed violence, in deed if not in word, in return for significant international moves. This would have to include the opening of a viable political track towards an end to occupation and Palestinian statehood. The movement has signalled its interest in such a quid pro quo in the past, when it engaged in national elections in 2006 and 2021 (prior to the cancellation of the latter) and committed itself to a two-state solution in 2017. However, Western capitals never responded positively to these moves – leaving Hamas's moderate leaders advocating these steps weakened.

Peacekeeping

Given the lack of trust between all sides, Gaza will still likely require an international peacekeeping force to monitor the implementation of a future ceasefire deal and the possible demobilisation of Hamas, and to support de-confliction efforts. Hamas and the PA have both indicated their openness to the deployment of an Arab “protection force” after a ceasefire. [41] Arab states have indicated they could back this as long as it comes with a viable political track towards Palestinian self-determination. [42] Such a force could include the participation of troops from Egypt, Morocco, and the UAE, which possess peacekeeping experience and maintain good relations with Israel. [43] Europeans should already offer technical, political and financial support for such an effort.

It should, however, also be clear to Europeans that a third-party force is not going to be willing or able to enforce the peace – or directly confront Hamas – given the deep reluctance of potential contributing states to fight a protracted insurgency against Hamas on Israel’s behalf. Hamas leaders maintain they would deem hostile and target any entity that attempts to do Israel’s bidding in the form of “achiev[ing] what the IDF failed to do”, such as forcibly disarming or detaining Hamas militants, destroying tunnels, and spying on the group’s activities. [44]

The necessity of a credible Israeli-Palestinian political track

The wider unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at the heart of the war in Gaza. A ceasefire without meaningful political progress towards ending Israel’s occupation will ultimately prove unsustainable – and will not secure the support of Palestinians or the key Arab states needed to ensure its sustainability.

Reviving a credible Israeli-Palestinian peace process will be a long-term process given the situation on the ground, the deep mutual hostility provoked by the 7 October attacks and the Gaza war, and Israeli opposition to engaging in a political track. But, if Europeans are truly committed to addressing this conflict, it is a challenge they cannot walk away from. They are not alone though and should make full use of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution which currently brings together 94 governments and regional and international organisations with the goal of ending Israel’s occupation and realising Palestinian independence.

Fulfilling Palestinian self-determination

A new political pathway will require a new European peace-making strategy that learns from the failures of the Oslo peace process, which effectively gave Israel a veto over Palestinian rights by focusing solely on bilateral negotiations between the parties. To salvage a political resolution, Europeans need to start by demonstrating clear international commitment to this outcome. As part of this they need to find immediate ways to demonstrate their support for a sovereign Palestinian state. This first step is essential because it would buttress a ceasefire deal and help secure the engagement of the PA and Arab states in post-conflict Gaza.

One straightforward way of doing this would be to expand European recognition of the State of Palestine, including support for UN membership. A total of 146 countries have already recognised Palestine, including most recently Ireland, Norway, Slovenia, and Spain. The United Kingdom and remaining EU members such as France should now follow suit.

Any move in support of Palestinian rights will be met with pushback from the Trump administration should it seek to advance its own competing Greater Israel vision based on Israeli supremacy and Palestinian subjugation. To face down US pressure, Europeans will need to tighten their cooperation with the Arab Contact Group (made up of Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia), which has called for full European and US recognition of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders. Their stronger existing relations with Trump and his key advisers mean that Arab Gulf monarchies are well positioned to influence future US policies on the Middle East – and to resist US pressure.

Working with Riyadh to leverage Saudi normalisation

Saudi Arabia's role will be particularly important. Europeans should aim to form a clear strategic partnership with Riyadh to deploy towards the US and Israeli governments. Over the past year, the way in which the 7 October attacks have spiralled into regional conflict is a reminder that Israel's integration with the Arab world will remain impossible while it denies Palestinians their rights. European and Arab governments will need to strongly convey to the Trump administration that any new push to widen Israeli-Arab ties – which Trump will want in order to further his legacy and demonstrate his deal-making skills compared to those of his predecessor – will be wholly dependent on establishing a credible pathway towards Palestinian independence.

At the heart of this should be the “Arab Vision” plan circulated in 2024 by the Arab Contact Group, which key measures are to: stabilise Gaza, return the PA, and secure Palestinian self-

determination – largely in alignment with the ideas laid out in this paper. [45] The new plan builds on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative by offering Israel full normalisation and integration into an inclusive regional security architecture – which, most importantly, means Saudi-Israeli peace – as well as the deployment of an international force to Gaza with the likely contribution of some Arab states. But all this is conditioned on the implementation of a two-state solution with East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders.

While the Arab Vision plan has been largely ignored by the Biden administration, it needs to be re-energised as the Trump team assumes office. Europeans should work closely with the Arab Contact Group and offer full political support for its plan. Europeans should work with Arab states to directly market their vision of regional peace to the Israeli public in an effort to generate support and domestic political pressure behind a peace track.

But the biggest target of this shared approach will need to be Trump himself, as the US is the sole actor with sufficient leverage to press Israel to make the necessary compromises. Working together, European and Arab states should aim to convince Trump that this represents a necessary – but also attractive – pathway to Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham accords. Given the core focus of the Arab Vision plan on ending the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Europeans should present this to Trump as a way to claim credit for this historic opening, giving him the deal-making acclaim he craves – and perhaps additionally the Nobel Peace prize that he clearly seeks.

Imposing a cost on Israel

While the US is the key actor able to assert pressure on Israel, Europeans must not shy away from their own responsibility. Creating incentives for Israel to make peace will need to be matched with real disincentives for continuing its occupation and war in Gaza. These will need to look beyond Netanyahu.

While it may be tempting to see Israel's longest-serving prime minister as the main obstacle to a viable political track, the country's decades-old and intensifying occupation of Palestinian territory and denial of Palestinian rights enjoys wide support across Israel's political spectrum. Today, no Israeli Jewish political party actively supports a two-state solution or an end to Israel's illegal settlement project. This was on full display in February 2024 when 99 out of 120 Knesset members voted for a resolution rejecting Palestinian statehood.

Ultimately, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will only end when Israel itself feels the cost of entrenching a one-state reality of perpetual occupation and inequality. This requires

European states to hold Israel to account for its human rights abuses and violations of international law in Gaza and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem). The Israeli population needs to understand that Europe has been a close partner, committed to their security and rights, but that their country must in turn commit to these same principles for Palestinians – or face growing international isolation.

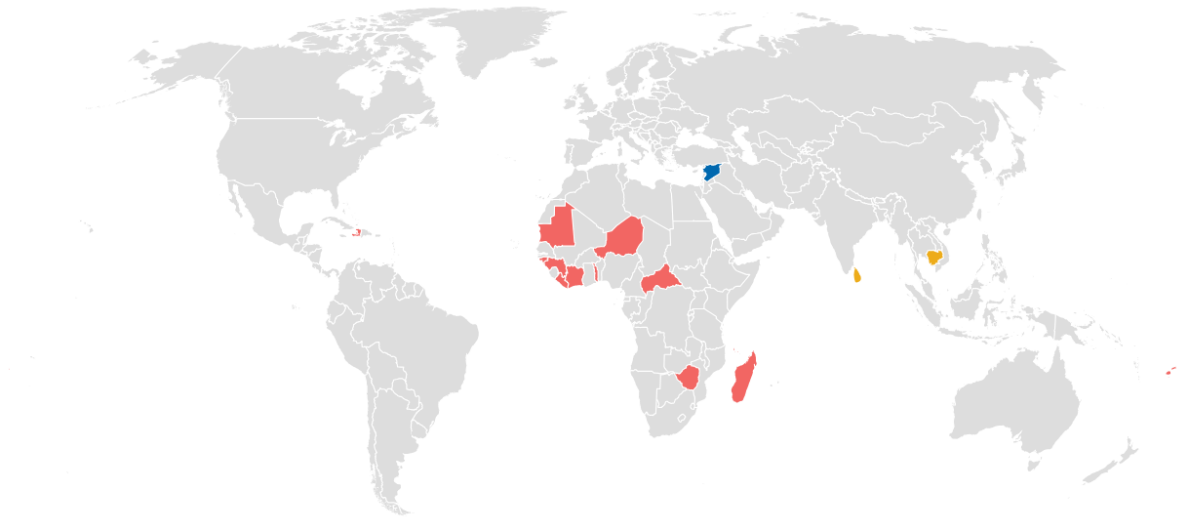
This requires Europeans to stem the flow of financing to Israeli settlements by banning the import of settlement products and financial services, as called for by the ICJ in its July ruling. The EU should also expand its sanctions against organisations that fund Israel's illegal settlement project, such as Amana (which the UK and the US have already sanctioned). They should also threaten automatic sanctions against organisations involved in returning Israeli settlers to Gaza.

However, the scale of Israel's violation of Palestinian rights also requires European countries, especially core supporters like Germany, to impose a real cost on Israel itself. Necessary steps entail an end to military assistance related to its war in Gaza and pursuing international accountability for Israeli war crimes (including by supporting the implementation of ICC arrest warrants and ICJ rulings).

The EU should also review its association agreement with Israel – which is the linchpin of the country's economic relations with the bloc and a key source of leverage – as it has done at least 26 times in the past in response to human rights breaches by other partner countries. While there is no unanimous consent among member states to support a full suspension, a qualified majority could suspend the agreement's trade provisions.

Suspension of EU agreements in response to human rights breaches

■ EU Cotonou agreements ■ EU's association agreement ■ Other EU agreements



Source: ECFR research; Answer given by Vice-President Mogherini on behalf of the Commission, Parliamentary question - 5 August 2015 E-008626/2015(ASW).
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These measures would create tangible dilemmas which Israelis have not faced for decades: a choice between economic prosperity and the restoration of their global status or forever war in an increasingly isolated Greater Israel. The clearer articulation of this dilemma could help strengthen Israel's anti-Netanyahu bloc, which has long claimed that the right-wing prime minister is turning Israel into a pariah state. It would lend credence to Israelis who argue for a change of course towards de-occupation.

Breaking the cycle

The path to peace in Gaza and the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict is certainly challenging. But the catastrophic humanitarian situation and very real prospect of open-ended war make diplomacy ever more pressing. The immediate question is the future of Gaza once the war ends. The answer must include increasing desperately needed aid and restoring locally owned governance, with a revitalised PA taking on the central security and governance role. Hamas cannot be fully excluded from Gaza's future given its influence on the ground. But a pragmatic diplomatic approach can help push the group towards withdrawing from its governance and security role and bring about its gradual military demobilisation.

These steps will depend on the establishment of a ceasefire. Yet no ceasefire is possible

without the articulation of a viable, internationally backed plan for the day after fighting ends. Such a plan will need to be underpinned by a robust political process to secure Palestinian self-determination. While this remains a long-term endeavour, European states can make immediate progress by recognising Palestine, supporting Palestinian reunification, and more decisively holding Israel to account for its severe violations of international law in both Gaza and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem).

The tragic lesson of 7 October is that long-term peace is impossible without an end to the occupation. This remains the only way to break the perpetual cycle of violence and obtain a just and enduring solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Europeans can, and must, play a central role in this endeavour, not least given their interests in regional stability and the preservation of the rules-based global order. With new pressures likely to emanate from the White House, Europeans should now look to forge a common path with Arab states to make the case for this outcome – including to Trump, given that the US must come on board for any hope of success.

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[1] Discussions with senior Hamas members based in Turkey and Doha, June-September 2024.

[2] Discussions with senior Hamas leader 2 and senior Hamas member 3, Doha, August 2024.

[3] Discussions with senior and mid-level Hamas members, Turkey and Qatar, since October 2023.

[4] Discussions with senior and mid-level Hamas members, Turkey and Qatar, since October 2023.

[5] Discussion with senior Hamas leader 2 and Hamas member 3, Doha, August 2024; and senior Hamas members, Istanbul, July 2024.

[6] Discussion with senior Hamas leader 2, Doha, August 2024.

[7] Discussion with senior Hamas member 3, Doha, August 2024.

[8] Discussion with former PA minister currently involved in coordinating aid's entry to Gaza, Barcelona, October 2024.

[9] Discussion with Gazan government official, Gaza, November 2024.

[10] Interviews with multiple civil servants in Hamas's government in Gaza, online, August 2024.

[11] Interviews with Gazan sources, online, between May and October 2024.

[12] Interviews with Gazan sources, online, between May and October 2024.

[13] Interviews with knowledgeable civil society leaders in Gaza and Hamas officials in Istanbul, online, March 2024.

[14] Discussion with regional officials, Madrid, 21 October 2024; and Arab capital, 15 October 2024.

[15] Discussions with senior PLO adviser in regular contact with Hamas leaders, Geneva, November 2024.

[16] Discussion with senior Hamas negotiators, Doha, December 2024.

[17] Discussion with senior Hamas negotiators, Doha, December 2024.

- [18] Discussions with former senior Israeli security adviser, Geneva, November 2024.
- [19] Interview with senior Hamas member 4 based in Istanbul, online, November 2024.
- [20] Discussions with senior Arab official involved in ceasefire talks, Madrid, October 2024.
- [21] Discussions with Israeli experts between May-September 2024.
- [22] Discussion with Israeli expert, Copenhagen, October 2024.
- [23] Document on file with authors.
- [24] Discussion with Gazan civil society leader, Salzburg, June 2024; and Hamas official 5, Doha, December 2024.
- [25] Discussions with senior Hamas member 3, Arab official, and Gazan businessman; Doha and Egypt; August 2024.
- [26] Discussion with senior Arab official involved in Gaza aid operations, Arab capital, October 2024.
- [27] Discussion with former PA minister currently involved in coordinating the entry of aid to Gaza, Barcelona, October 2024.
- [28] Copy of proposal circulated by Global Delivery Company on file with authors.
- [29] Discussion with senior Hamas leader 2, Doha, August 2024.
- [30] Discussions with senior member of Fatah's central committee 1, Ramallah, March 2024.
- [31] Discussions with foreign diplomats and Palestinian officials, Jerusalem and Ramallah, May 2024.
- [32] Discussions and online interviews with Hamas officials in Istanbul, Doha and Cairo since 7 October 2024; Senior member of Fatah's Central Committee 2, London, August 2024.
- [33] Interviews with a political party leader, a veteran Palestinian journalist, and a well-connected head of a think-tank in Ramallah, online, July 2024.
- [34] Discussions with senior Hamas members since 7 October 2023; PA officials, Ramallah, March 2024.

- [35] Discussion with a recently retired senior member of PA intelligence, Ramallah, May 2024.
- [36] Discussions with Arab officials; Madrid, Geneva, and Arab capitals; since October 2023.
- [37] Virtual interview with senior Gaza municipality official, September 2024.
- [38] Discussions with senior Hamas members in Istanbul and Doha since 7 October 2023.
- [39] Discussion with senior Hamas negotiator 1, Doha, December 2024.
- [40] Discussions with senior Hamas members in Turkey, May 2024; Hamas official 5, Doha, December 2024.
- [41] Discussion with senior Hamas leader 1, Istanbul, December 2023.
- [42] Discussions with Arab officials and experts, Madrid, March 2024.
- [43] Discussions with Arab officials and experts, Madrid, March 2024.
- [44] Discussions with senior Hamas officials, from the political bureau and negotiating team, Doha, August 2024.
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