

The Day After: A Plan For Gaza

Executive Summary





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I. Executive Summary

The October 7, 2023, invasion of southern Israel by Hamas and numerous Gazan civilians killed over 1,200 Israelis in the deadliest attack on Jews since the Holocaust. Roughly another 250 people were taken hostage. Coupled with Israel's military response, which intends to defeat Hamas as Gaza's military and governing authority, the events and aftermath of that day are creating stark new realities. Merely falling back on deeply-ingrained paradigms of the past two decades, such as moving expeditiously to a two-state solution, is likely to backfire and push prospects for peace even further away. Building a more peaceful and hopeful future for Israel, the Palestinians, and the Middle East necessitates both greater realism about the major challenges confronting the region after October 7, as well as new thinking to take advantage of opportunities that could arise should Israel's military campaign against Hamas succeed.

This report lays out a set of key findings and recommendations, based on nearly 100 interviews with current and former senior officials, military officers, and civil society experts from across the Middle East, the United States, and Europe. It recognizes the situation in Gaza and the region is fluid. Circumstances can change quickly, requiring new proposals, but this work is based on the situation through February 2024. It starts with an assessment of the impact of the Hamas attack and its implications for Israel, the region, and U.S. interests. It then offers a set of recommendations grounded in the conclusion that a better postwar future for Gaza should not be pursued in isolation, but as part of a broader U.S.-led strategy to counter escalating and increasingly shared threats driven by Iran – of which Hamas is but one dimension.

Among the key recommendations is the creation of an International Trust for Gaza Relief and Reconstruction, outside official United Nations (UN) auspices, to address and alleviate the territory's dire humanitarian situation and help build a new post-Hamas political and security dispensation. The Trust would, as explained below, work closely with Gazans who are dedicated to reconstruction and to building a peaceful society. These efforts to address the immediate crisis in Gaza should also be nested in a broader regional approach that purposefully seeks to establish a more durable basis not only for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, but for a new multinational alliance for Middle East peace and prosperity to counter Iran and its terrorist proxies – otherwise known as the “axis of resistance.”

Findings

Israel's Transformed Security Calculus

Many policymakers in Washington and abroad do not fully comprehend the transformative effects of Hamas's brutal attack on Israel's national psyche, threat perceptions, and strategic considerations for addressing Gaza and the larger Iran threat matrix. Any U.S. support for Israel's recovery from the attack should begin with a full appreciation of the profound national trauma that Israelis have suffered, and what it will take to help America's closest regional partner restore its deterrence, self-confidence, and readiness to take reasonable risks for peace.

As a result of October 7, there is a widespread perception in Israel that the collapse of its national security doctrine and the mass evacuation of its citizens from the Gaza and Lebanon border areas pose a potentially existential threat to the Jewish state's long-term wellbeing and survival. Among Israeli policymakers as well as the general public, a broad consensus believes that Hamas's massacre, in addition to its seizure of hundreds of hostages from their homes, has shattered the core promise of Zionism that Jews can live safely anywhere in Israel. Restoring that promise has become a national imperative. It requires conclusively demonstrating that those who perpetrate mass pogroms in the Jewish homeland will be dealt an overwhelming defeat. It also requires ensuring that no part of Israel is too dangerous for Israeli citizens to live. And it requires sending an unmistakable deterrent message to Iran and all others committed to Israel's destruction that any effort to act on their genocidal intent will put their own survival at risk.

Accordingly, Israel quickly put forward the twin war objectives of ensuring Hamas's destruction as a coherent military and governing force in Gaza, as well as securing the release of its hostages – about half of whom were freed during a pause in fighting last November. The goal of regime destruction is an operation that is uniquely ambitious in the combat-intense history of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). It represents a stark departure from the containment strategy toward Gaza that failed catastrophically on October 7, which consisted of incentivizing Hamas economically, periodically “mowing the lawn” to degrade its military capabilities, and banking on early warning and technological superiority to neutralize any attack.

Defeating Hamas will likely require Israel to maintain intrusive operations in Gaza at varying levels of intensity through at least the remainder of 2024, if not longer. Even after major combat operations conclude, the IDF will need ongoing freedom of action throughout the territory in order to finish clearing efforts against Hamas remnants, neutralize Hamas's expansive military infrastructure – especially its vast network of underground tunnels – and ensure that Hamas and other extremist forces like Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) cannot reconstitute.

A final major consequence of October 7 that policymakers will need to address is the profound damage done to Israeli attitudes about the possibility of peace with the Palestinians. Israelis watched in horror as Gazan civilians not only hailed the attack, but actively participated in it in large numbers. Similar spontaneous celebrations broke out in the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority (PA) refused to condemn the massacre and popular support for Hamas spiked. As a result, skepticism about a two-state solution across the Israeli political spectrum is as high as it has ever been.

So, too, are Israeli demands that before the creation of a Palestinian state can be seriously entertained, there will need first to be a lengthy and far-reaching reform process for Palestinian governance and society, including a comprehensive program of deradicalization. The reality is that the Palestinians currently are in no position to effectively negotiate, much less make the requisite compromises, on the core issues that need to be resolved to create an independent state. International efforts to rush Israelis into a peace process with a PA and Palestinian society that remain unreconstructed, or have only been cosmetically “revitalized,” are a recipe for deadlock and failure. Indeed, what is needed for a durable peace to be reached is the rebuilding of transparent and accountable Palestinian institutions that are the necessary steps toward regaining the trust of Palestinians, Israelis, and the international community in preparation for a future two-state outcome.

No “Day After” in Gaza Alone

October 7 was only the first major eruption in the “ring of fire” that Tehran and its proxies have erected across the Middle East to pursue their goals of destroying and deterring Israel, driving America out of the region, and establishing hegemony over the Arab states and Islamic world. The disruptive effect of Hamas’s attack on U.S.-led talks to forge an historic normalization deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as the synchronized surge of attacks since then by Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, are potent reminders of the scope, reach, and danger of Iran’s network of terrorist armies.

Most tellingly, Hamas’s brutal attack executed the playbook originally developed by Hezbollah’s much more capable Radwan forces, which from their positions directly on Israel’s border with Lebanon could inflict even greater horrors on Israeli civilians. Moreover, Hezbollah’s far larger arsenal of more accurate and deadly missiles are potentially capable of overwhelming Israel’s integrated air and missile defenses, wreaking destruction well beyond anything ever launched from Gaza.

Since October 7, Hezbollah has launched intense daily attacks on Israeli military positions and civilian areas near the border. Tens of thousands of people in Israel’s north have fled their homes due to intensified fears of Hezbollah, leaving important parts of the country uninhabited. These unprovoked attacks on the UN-recognized state of Israel

and its civilians underscore that the tangible Iran-led threat to regional peace extends well beyond Hamas and Gaza. In the absence of successful diplomacy to cease these attacks and convince Iran and Hezbollah to permanently redeploy the Radwan forces away from the border, consistent with UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701, the prospects that the IDF will eventually have to initiate major offensive operations are dangerously high. The resulting war would almost certainly produce devastation on a scale even greater than the current conflict in Gaza, including in Israel itself, with the corresponding risk of a broader regionwide conflagration erupting also dramatically increased.

In this dangerous context, Israel's elimination of Hamas rule would have important regional benefits. It would send a critical deterrent message to Iran and Hezbollah as they contemplate whether to risk a major war with Israel over the Radwan forces. It would mark the first major defeat of Iran's regional proxy strategy and create new opportunities to expand and deepen Israel's ties to key Arab states, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. These countries have strong interests in seeing Hamas defeated, Iran weakened, and the Gaza-Palestinian issue put on a more sustainable track, so that they can pursue ambitious domestic priorities, boost their ties with Israel, marginalize their rivals and key Hamas patrons in Qatar and Turkey, and weaken their enemy Iran's threats to regional peace.

In the wake of October 7, the Saudis and Emiratis have expressed unprecedented readiness not only to take a major role in Gaza's rehabilitation and the reform of the PA, but to forge closer strategic relations with Israel. To do so, their leaders have asserted that they need a credible two-state political horizon to justify to their own populations, and those of the broader Arab and Islamic worlds, that their engagement is directly in service of larger Palestinian political aspirations and not just those of Israel or the United States. Reconciling these Arab needs with Israel's hardened attitudes toward a Palestinian state will require creative U.S. diplomacy. It will also likely require U.S. security assurances to help shield its Arab partners from Iranian intimidation and charges of "betrayal" for being willing to work with Israel even while its military operations in Gaza continue.

Hard Truths, Core Realities, and Prerequisites

Developing a policy for moving toward a more stable and peaceful Gaza requires first embracing several core realities and prerequisites. Foremost, there will be no "day after" in Gaza unless Hamas's military capabilities and governing authority are effectively destroyed by Israel, and its surviving remnants are rendered incapable of thwarting a post-Hamas administration from emerging.

A major factor that could complicate Israel's ability to dismantle Hamas concerns the fate of over 130 Israeli hostages still being held by Hamas. The anguished families of the hostages are naturally bringing intense pressure on Israel's government to do whatever it takes to bring their loved ones home, up to and including agreeing to a lengthy

pause in fighting or even a permanent ceasefire, as well as the release of thousands of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. Indeed, some believe that the war's continuation may now pose the greatest threat to the hostages, fearful that they could lose their lives in an errant IDF strike or at the orders of Hamas's leadership as a desperate last act before being captured or killed.

A key element of Hamas's strategy, of course, is to manipulate and exploit these concerns for its own purposes. Hamas knows that the hostages are its greatest leverage in trying to force Israel to end the war. For their own reasons, often having to do with short-term considerations of domestic politics and foreign policy, but also out of a laudable desire to end the suffering of innocent Palestinians, many countries are also eager to end the fighting and see a hostage deal as the vehicle for doing so.

The excruciating decision about a ceasefire and what price Israel is prepared to pay to secure the release of its endangered citizens is of course ultimately only one that the Israeli people can make. As understandable as it would be, the acceptance of Hamas's demand for a permanent ceasefire as the price for securing the hostages' release would carry grave strategic risks. Hamas perpetrated the most catastrophic attack in Israel's history and subsequently has faced the full wrath of the IDF's response. If, after that, Hamas is left battered but still standing and in de facto control of Gaza, it will be widely viewed across the Middle East as an historic achievement for Iran's axis of resistance and a huge defeat for Israel. Israel's security, deterrence, and Zionism itself would be further undermined in the eyes of its enemies. Iran's strategy of violence, chaos, hostage-taking, and murderous terrorism in its war against Israel would be powerfully validated.

Hamas's survival would not only destroy Gaza's hopes for a better future; it would also greatly diminish prospects for wider peace efforts. Given Hamas's commitment to perpetual conflict with Israel, responsible Arab states like the UAE and Saudi Arabia would not invest the resources needed for Gaza's relief, recovery, and reconstruction. There would be no opportunity to create more moderate and decent Palestinian governance that can reunite Gaza and the West Bank under a single authority and serve as a viable peace partner for Israel. On the contrary, the widespread regional perception of victory by Hamas and Iran's axis of resistance would greatly complicate U.S. efforts to broker a two-state solution, as well as further Israeli-Arab normalization and integration. As painful as the costs of Israel's campaign against Hamas have been, the costs of a premature end to hostilities that leaves Gaza as a proto-terrorist state and constant source of instability for Israel and the region will be higher.

As evidenced by international pressures for a ceasefire, defeating Hamas has already entailed larger-scale IDF operations for longer timeframes than many American officials, and certainly the international community, find comfortable or acceptable. This will remain true even as the IDF pivots toward a standoff posture of more targeted counterterrorism-focused incursions, as is already happening in northern Gaza. The reality

is that Israeli efforts to prevent Hamas from reconstituting and its work to neutralize Hamas's massive tunnel network and other military infrastructure will likely continue throughout 2024 and possibly beyond.

Though critical, Israel's dismantling of Hamas rule has also created major risks. The war's devastation has destroyed or damaged large amounts of Gaza's housing stock and other essential infrastructure, crippled the delivery of basic services, and created vast amounts of human suffering. After 16 years of tyranny, Hamas's removal from power will leave Gaza with no governing authority or functioning security apparatus. The odds are high that Gaza will endure significant chaos and suffering during its difficult and drawn-out transition to a post-Hamas future.

Developing a strategy to mitigate the risks of a humanitarian catastrophe and Gaza's all-out descent into violent anarchy will be imperative, even as the war continues. Starting in areas of Gaza largely cleared of Hamas control, a mechanism quickly needs to be developed that can ensure the secure delivery of large-scale aid, including provisional housing; the rapid reestablishment of basic services and repair of critical infrastructure; and support for the emergence of non-Hamas governance and policing. This mechanism should seek to help local Gazans, as well as those in the West Bank and diaspora, play crucial roles in improving their own future in the face of humanitarian crisis and Hamas's violent efforts to suppress them.

Over the longer term, even if Hamas is deposed and Gaza demilitarized, Israelis across the political spectrum likely will insist that both their security and their ability to address Palestinian political aspirations will require a credible program for deradicalizing both Gaza and the West Bank. Accordingly, the call from friendly Arab states for a credible path toward a two-state solution will need to be tempered by realism and Israel's legitimate demand for more than a quick-fix "revitalization" of the PA and its swift return to Gaza as the governing authority.

Implications for Planning Gaza's Future

In light of these hard truths, many of the proposals or options put forth for immediate post-Hamas security and governance in Gaza are unworkable, unwise, or otherwise unrealistic. These include misguided proposals for the current PA, Arab armies, Israel, or U.S. or UN forces to lead Gaza into a new era. The PA's incompetence, corruption, and anti-Israel incitement render it incapable for the foreseeable future of credibly stepping in to provide basic security, services, and responsible government in Gaza, let alone reassure Israel that Gaza can become a partner for longer-term peace. Even a process of serious reform and revitalization of the PA would take a significant amount of time before it could be in a position to play any effective and constructive role in Gaza.

For its part, Israel will be focused on defeating Hamas and destroying its terrorist infrastructure. It cannot and should not try to assume the burdens of reoccupying Gaza, providing for the critical needs of its population, and building a new governing and security apparatus. Doing so would discourage local Gazans from coming forward to help rebuild their communities. It would also exacerbate tensions more generally with Palestinians, the wider Arab world, and the international community, leaving Israel increasingly under pressure and isolated. It also would threaten to bog Israel down in Gaza, drain its economy, and erode the ability of America's most capable strategic partner in the Middle East to address even more dangerous threats from Iran and Hezbollah.

Going through the UN is also not a viable option. Russia and China would likely block, or severely complicate and undermine, any Security Council effort to authorize a peace-keeping force or UN-mandated trusteeship in Gaza. Even if they relented, there is no reason to believe that any UN force, either traditional blue-helmeted peacekeepers or non-UN forces operating under a more muscular UN Chapter VII mandate, could conduct the aggressive peacebuilding efforts needed in Gaza – including preventing Hamas's reconstitution via intense and complex counterterrorism operations. Nor would Israel agree again to rely on a UN force for its security after the disastrous failure of the UN mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to enforce UNSCR 1701 by disarming Hezbollah and keeping it out of southern Lebanon. Even on the off-chance that Israel conceded a role for UN-mandated forces strictly limited to helping police Gaza's civilian population, it is inconceivable that the Security Council would approve such a mission in the context of Israel's demand that it retain freedom of action to conduct regular counterterrorism operations against Hamas remnants.

Israel has no greater faith in the UN's civilian efforts. Past UN-brokered reconstruction deals in Gaza failed both to rebuild the Strip and to prevent Hamas's brisk rearmament. The UN's lead agency in Gaza, the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), has been almost completely discredited. For years, it has notoriously run schools that foment anti-Semitic radicalism among Palestinians. Now, mounting evidence from Israel's military operations confirm that UNRWA not only allowed Hamas to abuse its facilities and infiltrate its activities and staff on a systematic basis, but also that several of its employees actually participated in the October 7 terrorist attack.

While appealing in theory, deploying forces from friendly Arab states to assume core security responsibilities in Gaza would pose unacceptable risks to the shared U.S., Israeli, and Arab interest in deepening and expanding the Abraham Accords. Interposing Arab troops between ongoing IDF operations against Hamas and Palestinian civilians would open them to charges of doing Israel's bidding by repressing or even killing fellow Arabs. It also would create dangerous potential for confrontations or even violent clashes between Israeli and Arab forces that could have disastrous geopolitical consequences, and which Hamas and Iran would no doubt work hard to bring about.

A U.S.-led force would be far more capable than virtually any outside force besides the IDF, but its advantages would be outweighed by the significant risks and downsides. Another major U.S. commitment of forces to the Middle East would face widespread opposition from Congress and the American public. It would divert precious troops and resources from more strategically important U.S. missions in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. There would be a high risk of misunderstandings, disagreements, and even confrontations between U.S. and Israeli forces that could undermine the broader U.S.-Israel strategic relationship. Hamas and Iran would do their utmost to foster such friction points, and to inflict high casualties on American servicemembers in the urban cauldron of Gaza. A failed mission, resulting in U.S. withdrawal, would shatter American credibility and deterrence, embolden Iran, and be highly destabilizing both regionally and globally.

Given the impossibility or undesirability of having PA, Israeli, UN, Arab, or U.S. forces leading peace-building and security efforts on the ground in Gaza, the best remaining option is for an altogether new approach. Through all the pitfalls of these widely-debated options, there nevertheless remains a constellation of actors, within Gaza and without, that could potentially be mobilized as an ad hoc coalition of the willing to address the immediate humanitarian emergency and help shape efforts to administer, rebuild, and police Gaza – even while Israel continues in the critical mission of dismantling Hamas and retaining its ability to counter future threats. This coalition would ideally be led by friendly Arab countries with the greatest international legitimacy, capacity, and interests to act in the Palestinian arena – such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Jordan, and/or Morocco – with active U.S. backing. Given the aforementioned risks and impracticalities of Arab states or other key actors assuming primary security responsibility in Gaza, these prospective coalition members would need to create a separate, standalone mechanism through which they can rapidly address Gaza’s urgent needs without directly putting their own national equities into Gaza as Israel continues conducting operations.

Recommendations

International Trust for Gaza Relief and Reconstruction

We believe that key interested nations should work together to create, fund, and lead an entirely new multibillion-dollar private organization dedicated to Gaza’s post-Hamas recovery and reconstruction. In the short term, this organization would seek to play a leading role in addressing Gaza’s immediate suffering and the need to restore basic services. Thereafter, it would work to identify and support moderate Gazan leaders seeking to build good governance, while also guiding Gaza’s deradicalization and long-term economic recovery.

Such an organization could be styled as an international “Trust” or “Fund.” For present purposes, this report suggests calling it the International Trust for Gaza Relief and Reconstruction (the “Trust”).

The coalition of countries forming the Trust should consist primarily of friendly Arab states with the capacity, legitimacy, and desire to help the people of Gaza advance a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and counter Iran-led extremism. Importantly, it should be established as an independent and discrete legal entity and governed by a board whose members would be appointed by participating states. While it would function with the backing and oversight of its national sponsors, the Trust would have an identity distinct and separate from them, behaving more as a super-non-governmental organization (NGO) than a coalition of national sovereigns. Such a structure would offer participating countries a far less politically charged means of getting involved in Gaza quickly, allowing them to avoid putting their own prestige, officials, or troops into the middle of a still-fraught geopolitical situation where Israeli forces will remain active for months to come.

The Trust’s first priority would be mobilizing a large-scale emergency relief effort, using all available Egyptian and Israeli land and sea routes to get supplies into Gaza. Israel has a deep interest in having responsible Arab partners involved as early as possible to help shoulder the burdens of building Gaza’s post-Hamas future, and it should be encouraged to facilitate the Trust’s operations to the greatest extent feasible, including all necessary coordination and deconfliction with the IDF.

Ideally, the Trust’s efforts would begin as soon as possible and on a rolling basis, starting in areas of northern and central Gaza where Israel’s efforts to dismantle Hamas control are most advanced, and then moving southward as similar progress is made there. Beyond the delivery of food, water, and medical care, the Trust should focus on shelter and the rapid establishment of humanitarian islands of stability that would take advantage of the latest techniques to build large, prefabricated housing communities. Each of these communities could be capable of hosting tens of thousands of people and providing for their essential needs.

Initial progress on humanitarian relief could lead to a follow-on phase focused on helping establish permanent post-Hamas essential services, administrative structures, political leadership, and police forces, as well as large-scale economic reconstruction. The Trust’s civil society efforts would include technical and administrative assistance on matters of governance and deradicalization. The Trust’s ultimate purpose in all these programs would be to help Gaza emerge as a key component of a conditions-based path to a negotiated two-state solution.

Early in its work, the Trust should establish an advisory council to help guide its operations and maximize its cooperation with the population. The council should consist of closely-vetted local Gazans as well as Gazans from the West Bank and diaspora who have

administrative, security, and professional experience, skills, and influence in line with the Trust's mission and goals, and who have the greatest knowledge of Gazan society.

As Hamas's control of Gaza unravels but remnants of its fighters remain, an essential immediate consideration for the Trust will be ensuring the security of its own personnel and its key Palestinian partners, as well as its aid shipments, humanitarian encampments, and critical infrastructure projects such as electricity and water facilities. The Trust should seek the assistance of capable security forces from non-regional nation-states that have strong ties with Israel and are prepared to coordinate with its ongoing anti-Hamas operations.

Should such national forces not be available, or if their numbers need to be supplemented, the Trust should strongly consider a more novel option: hiring, training, and equipping private security contractors (PSC) with good reputations for their past work with Western militaries, for a set of well-defined interim security missions such as protecting aid convoys. Despite widespread perceptions, such PSCs, if properly overseen and disciplined, have a proven track record of providing important and reliable security in non-permissive environments such as Gaza. After a notorious 2007 lethal incident in Iraq involving the U.S. security company known as Blackwater, the U.S. military adopted a comprehensive management framework for the tens of PSCs under its authority with significant success. The framework included strong licensing requirements, strict rules of engagement, close monitoring of PSC missions (including drone surveillance and embedded observers), and a forceful accountability regime with imposition of swift and meaningful penalties for infractions, up to and including withdrawal of licenses and financial forfeitures.

The Trust would operate in tandem with partner states, NGOs, and international bodies, including the UN. However, in light of the UN's deeply problematic posture toward Israel in general and toward Gaza specifically, the Trust would be independent of UN auspices. Indeed, where possible, the Trust's humanitarian efforts should seek to replace UNRWA's aid activities, which are now badly tainted and an increasing deterrent to many international donors. Over the longer term, the Trust should cooperate with other concerned parties on a strategy to replace the functions performed by UNRWA with alternative mechanisms, including a functioning Gazan administration, with a clear eye to putting UNRWA out of business. For similar reasons, the Trust should seek to marginalize or eliminate Turkey's and Qatar's unconstructive roles in Gaza over the long term.

While recognizing the inability of an unreconstructed PA to play a near-term role in Gaza's governance, the Trust should encourage the PA to endorse its mission to help Gaza recover, including by encouraging former PA officials in Gaza to cooperate with the Trust's work.

If the United States and Israel find merits in aspects of the Trust proposal, it might best be pursued in confidential discussions with prospective participants, foremost Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE. Quiet negotiations among the parties might then determine the best terms and course by which to work toward the Trust's objectives. In these discussions, special attention should be paid to the significant advantages of having the Trust emerge as an Arab-led initiative, especially in terms of international legitimacy.

Two-State Political Horizon

To marshal critical international support for the Trust, the United States will need to square a circle between the competing needs of Israel and key Arab states on the issue of a two-state solution. As Israeli President Isaac Herzog warned in January at the World Economic Forum in Davos, “no Israeli in their right mind” is thinking about a Palestinian state in the aftermath of October 7.¹ Yet friendly Arab states have made clear that their ability to play a major role in Gaza's recovery and expand their relations with Israel is contingent on there being a credible political horizon that results in a two-state solution. Similarly, aspiring local Gazan leaders will be much more likely to come forward, and all Gazans more likely to support efforts to build a post-Hamas future, if they too can plausibly claim they are working toward their own sovereignty and not just acting as quislings for Israel's security needs.

Restoring a realistic pathway to an eventual two-state solution can be a critical part of a better future for Gaza and the region. The establishment of a Palestinian state truly committed to peace with Israel should be recognized by all parties at the outset as their desired end state. At the same time, those same parties will need to be realistic in terms of the arduous and lengthy processes to reach it. In order to advance such a political solution, the first steps must be reconstruction of Gaza as both a home for two million Palestinians and as a polity able to contribute meaningfully to a peaceful Palestinian state. Simultaneously the PA in the West Bank must be overhauled through a systematic process of reform, including new leadership committed to building competent, effective, and non-corrupt governance. Like post-Hamas Gaza, Palestinian society in the West Bank will also require a thorough process of deradicalization that friendly Arab states are best positioned to support in light of their own successful experience carrying out such programs in countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Timetables for progress will be illusory and damaging if based on artificial deadlines and not concrete achievements. Avoiding the heavy lifting needed to deradicalize Palestinian society, and instead rushing ahead with quick fixes, cosmetic reform, hasty elections, high-level diplomatic gambits, or hasty reunification of the West Bank and Gaza will be deeply counterproductive. Talks will be stillborn or, worse, collapse at the negotiating table, extremists will win snap Palestinian elections, and the two-state political horizon will be discredited to the detriment of all those seeking a better future for Gaza and the Palestinian people. The winners would be Hamas, Iran, and the axis of resistance.

Comprehensive U.S. Regional Strategy

Ultimately, a better future for Israel and the Palestinians is inseparable from dealing with Iran's overarching threat to the entire region. Hamas was only the first, but far from the most dangerous, eruption of Tehran's "ring of fire" that poses increasingly shared and growing challenges to Israel, friendly Arab states, U.S. interests, and the global economy. And just as October 7 painfully proved the failure of Israel's past efforts merely to contain growing threats from Hamas and Hezbollah, regionwide developments now show the untenability of America's parallel policy of muddling through without sufficiently addressing the increasingly acute Iran-led problem set.

A comprehensive strategy for the Middle East must be based squarely on U.S. leadership and deterrence, and it must treat both the causes and solutions for the Gaza problem as intimately interlinked with the rest of the region. A new U.S. approach should build from two important yet incomplete initiatives, which if fulfilled would be much less costly and risky than past practice of trying to skirt tough decisions, reduce commitments, and ultimately pivot away from the region. First, the shared U.S.-Israel-Arab interest in further expanding and deepening the Abraham Accords, despite tensions surrounding Gaza, shows how American leadership and commitment can enable its partners to assume greater risks and burdens in countering Iran and advancing regional prosperity. Second, President Biden's decision to surge U.S. forces into the region, and to warn Hezbollah and Iran against full-scale intervention, are useful reminders that there is no substitute for U.S. deterrence which, if properly applied, actually does work against Tehran and its proxies.

Among friend and foe alike, perceptions of U.S. deterrence and leadership are directly proportional to the strength of the U.S.-Israel strategic partnership. Thus a top U.S. priority should be helping Israel rebound from the shock of October 7 as a self-confident and resilient ally, a valuable strategic and economic partner to friendly Arab states, and a security provider defending shared interests against Iran and its terrorist proxy armies.

Firstly, this means supporting Israel's goal of eliminating Hamas's military and governance capabilities. This is also the prerequisite for rebuilding and offering a better life for Gazans, and for revamping a PA that no longer seeks to compete with Hamas for the mantle of anti-Israeli resistance. Ensuring Tehran and the axis of resistance suffer a clear defeat in Gaza is also the prerequisite for starting to address the larger Iranian challenge. The more effectively Israel can rebuild its broken deterrence, and the more unequivocally the United States stands by its side, the more friendly Arab states will be reassured that they can take the risks of joining U.S.-led efforts for peace in Gaza and elsewhere, and the lower the risks of an emboldened Iran taking action that triggers a broader, costlier regionwide conflict.

In addition, the United States must take the lead in addressing the parallel, but more widely shared, failure made equally clear by October 7: the centerpiece challenge from Hezbollah at the heart of Iran's imperial project. Just as Israelis will not return to southern Israel until they have reliable protections against revived attacks – including the removal of Hamas as a viable threat – tens of thousands of displaced Israeli citizens will not return to the north as long as Hezbollah's formidable Radwan ground forces remain in striking distance of the Israel-Lebanon border, threatening an even bigger and more devastating attack than October 7.

The Biden administration's initial diplomatic probes to push these forces permanently away from the Israel-Lebanon border, and to enforce UNSCR 1701, should include clear back-channel messages demanding Tehran pull back its Lebanese proxy from the border and conveying American support for Israel's existential imperative to remove the threat one way or another. This message will be all the more effective, and the risks of major conflict diminished, if backed by robust U.S. military preparations and substantial material support that boosts the credibility of Israel's own coercive threats. To this end, American envoys should avoid emphasizing publicly their fears of escalation and their overriding concern to "stabilize" the situation, as this only reinforces dangerous Iranian impressions of U.S. self-deterrence and, by extension, willingness to pressure Israel to deescalate if diplomacy fails.

In parallel, the Biden administration urgently must turn off its open-ended and conciliatory diplomacy that seeks only to delay, or even ignore, Tehran's acceleration toward nuclear weapons capability – another example of the disastrous consequences of simply kicking every can down the road. With Israel's deterrence still reeling from the shock of October 7 and the IDF straining on multiple other fronts, the United States should maintain the world's focus on the overriding danger of a nuclear-armed Iran. Assertive and credible U.S.-led military threats, economic sanctions, and diplomatic pressure are essential to keep Iran from taking the final steps to cross the nuclear threshold.

These challenges also heighten the importance and urgency of bolstering Israel's own deterrence against Tehran and its proxies. With the IDF facing multiple manpower- and firepower-intense conflicts at once, U.S. support must include sustained and expedited arms transfers, beyond the Biden administration's absolutely crucial resupplies to date. This also could entail widening bilateral security ties into new fields like homeland defense, and as part of a much-needed effort to incorporate allies in strengthening America's ailing defense industrial base, could also include expanding Israeli military production lines. These and other cooperative ventures will remain salient even as Israel ramps up defense outlays significantly. Congress must end its inaction and authorize vital U.S. assistance here, since Israel needs massive munitions stocks to deter Hezbollah and Iran as its current inventories are rapidly depleted in the ongoing Gaza operation.

At the same time, the United States must resume its efforts to deepen Israeli-Arab strategic and diplomatic ties as part of its larger drive toward a new U.S.-led regional security architecture. Allowing Hamas's attack to derail these vital initiatives, especially amid ongoing signals of continued interest from Israel and friendly Arab states, would only worsen the very same problems the Biden administration has devoted so much time and resources trying to solve. The United States' irreplicable ability to offer security and economic commitments that can convince Arab partners to help counter Iran-led threats should also be leveraged to incentivize Arab participation in rebuilding Gaza and in overhauling the PA to make it a viable peace partner for Israel and the region.

This entails reasserting functional U.S. deterrence, chiefly through forceful military action to fulfill repeated pledges to protect its own explicit national security interests in Middle East freedom of navigation. Such moves can assuage Saudis' and other Arabs' fears that Tehran and its Houthi proxies will continue holding their economies and societies at risk and stymieing their efforts to move on from Yemen's disastrous civil war and pursue ambitious domestic priorities.