

A Year After 10/7, Is It The "Day After" Yet?

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Introduction

Eight months ago, JINSA and The Vandenberg Coalition published “[The Day After: A Plan For Gaza](#).” That report reflected the work of the bipartisan Gaza Futures Task Force, an eight-person group that deliberated for four months, conducting nearly 100 expert interviews, including with top U.S., Israeli, and Arab officials. The Task Force also undertook multiple trips to the Middle East. The report included key recommendations on how Washington and its partners committed to establishing a more stable and secure Middle East could realistically begin the difficult but important work of providing relief and recovery to Gaza, including helping transition to a new Palestinian-led civilian administration and security structure committed to living in peace with Israel.

Specifically, the Task Force called on key national stakeholders, led by the United States and its most influential Arab partners, to back the creation of a private multinational trust – the International Trust for Gaza Relief and Reconstruction – dedicated in the first instance to delivering vital aid to suffering Palestinians even as Israel’s war against Hamas continued. The Trust would also move over time to supporting qualified Palestinians in forming an interim post-Hamas administration that could help restore essential services, oversee Gaza’s reconstruction, and work to achieve a more secure, prosperous, and peaceful future for the Palestinian people in both Gaza and the West Bank.

The Task Force coupled its idea for the Trust with a stress on the importance of security. It noted that the Trust’s success was inextricably linked with ensuring that its operations were adequately protected from inevitable attempts by Hamas remnants to thwart initiatives designed to undermine the group’s grip on power. While such a security framework might consist of multiple components, including capable Palestinian police and third-country troops, the Task Force believed that, as a practical matter, there would be a near-term shortage of governments volunteering to put their troops in harm’s way. Accordingly, the Task Force put forward the creative, albeit controversial recommendation that the Trust should look to cover such a shortfall by hiring experienced and reputable private security companies (PSCs) to perform key transitional missions revolving around delivering aid,

securing infrastructure, and protecting the Trust’s own personnel as well as any newly emergent Palestinian administration.

In the intervening eight months, those recommendations – while at the time garnering genuine interest from several national governments – have, alas, not been adopted. Admittedly, the same could be said for every other “day after” plan that has been proposed since October 7, not only by multiple think tanks in the United States and Israel, but by the U.S. government itself. The reality is that more than a year into the Gaza war, a yawning “day after” void still exists, with no clear strategy yet articulated, much less acted upon, for the purpose of building a more positive post-Hamas future in Gaza that could advance the interests of Palestinians, Israelis, and the broader Middle East.

This paper attempts to do several things. First, it seeks to identify some of the reasons behind the striking lack of progress on issues relating to the “day after,” which includes the Biden administration’s single-minded focus on first negotiating a ceasefire and hostage release that it hoped would eventually end the war permanently. Second, the paper briefly examines the question of whether the “day after,” and the goal of defeating Hamas and building a post-Hamas alternative remain relevant, especially as the war drags on, fatigue grows both internationally and in Israel with the conflict’s rising costs, and global attention is diverted to other boiling fronts in Israel’s expanding confrontation with Iran’s axis of resistance. Third, to the extent that Israel’s government continues to resist efforts to downgrade its war aims and remains determined to break Hamas’s rule in Gaza permanently, the paper reviews the importance of the assumptions undergirding the Task Force’s recommendations, as well as the recommendations themselves, to argue for their continued relevance and utility should any “day after” strategy eventually be seriously pursued by the United States, Israel, and their most influential Arab partners.

Importantly, the analysis represents only the views of the author, who served as the Task Force’s chairman. No Task Force deliberations have occurred since the publication of its original report in February 2024 and no other Task Force members were consulted in the drafting of this report.

The “Day After” Void

While the Biden administration moved very quickly after October 7 to [publicize](#) its own “day after” vision, its insistence on a leading role for the Palestinian Authority (PA) and a [“time-bound, irreversible path”](#) for establishing a Palestinian state guaranteed that its ideas would land with a thud in Israel. At a minimum, the U.S. conditions were tone deaf to the depths of trauma inflicted on Israeli society by the Hamas massacres. Across broad swathes of the political spectrum, from right to left, the visceral reaction was to see October 7 as an historical hinge point that demanded deep introspection about Israel’s security dilemma and the necessity for new thinking and approaches to ensure the nation’s future survival.

In that context, the Biden team's immediate effort to double-down on what were widely perceived as the failed 30-year-old shibboleths of the Oslo Accords was destined to be treated as dead on arrival. A February 2024 vote in the Knesset, in which a staggering 99 of 120 members [rejected](#) the unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state, fairly reflected Israel's broad national consensus.

Having dismissed the Biden administration's "day after" vision, the Israeli government proved incapable or unwilling to come forward with any positive plan of its own for what should happen in Gaza following the war to defeat Hamas. This despite widespread [clamoring](#) within the Israeli defense establishment about the necessity of moving expeditiously to create an alternative governing structure to Hamas that could help fill any political vacuum and convert the battlefield successes of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) into a strategic victory.

The right-wing coalition undergirding Israel's current government is itself deeply divided over Gaza's future. It includes a small element – but one without which the government could be destabilized – that believes the only means of ensuring that Gaza can never again be used to threaten Israel is to re-occupy and settle it permanently. Any government "day after" plan that envisions Israel ceding authority over Gaza to other actors, especially the PA, could risk the coalition's stability – a significant disincentive to advancing any concrete proposal.

Beyond concerns about the government's survival, some Israeli security analysts close to the government put forward several [policy arguments](#) for postponing "day after" discussions. They argue that the time for unveiling detailed strategies should be delayed until Hamas's military has been far more thoroughly defeated and its infrastructure of tunnels, command and control centers, weapons depots, and armament factories neutralized. That task, they believe, could still take many more months of extensive "mopping up" operations and targeted raids, potentially lasting well into 2025. Only at that point, they maintain, will the risk of a Hamas resurgence be sufficiently reduced that non-Hamas Palestinians will be prepared to join any effort to build a new civilian authority. As a cautionary tale, they point to the [execution](#) of one or two local Gazan clan leaders earlier in the war who had agreed, as part of a [pilot program](#), to [work](#) with the IDF in delivering humanitarian aid outside Hamas-controlled channels.

Israeli proponents of delay also argue that the premature articulation of a "day after" vision could make the essential task of decimating Hamas's military more difficult. They worry that once specific Palestinian and/or international partners have been designated to play a major role in building a post-Hamas administration, they will inevitably feel entitled to make demands and impose restrictions on the way that the IDF conducts the remainder of its operations inside Gaza, thereby adding potentially disruptive diplomatic and political complications to an already challenging military mission.

America's Priority: Ceasefire First, "Day After" Later – if Ever

With the U.S. and Israel seemingly stalemated over the “day after,” discussion about the topic largely vanished from public view for much of 2024. In its place, the United States opted instead to focus the bulk of its attention and energies on diplomatic efforts to mediate a sustained ceasefire that would provide for the return of Israeli hostages, a surge of humanitarian assistance into Gaza, and – if the United States had its way – an eventual permanent end to the war.

Indeed, after briefing its “day after” plan to the U.S. government in mid-January 2024, members of the Task Force heard essentially that argument – that Washington’s immediate priority was to achieve a ceasefire that could be leveraged to end the war for good. “Give us 30 days of a ceasefire and we can do a lot” to end the war was what one senior U.S. official said. While influential members of the Biden administration expressed appreciation for the Task Force’s plan, they also conveyed the impression that the utility of its ideas might only be relevant later – either as part of a Plan B should Plan A, the ceasefire talks, fail; or as elements of a more comprehensive “day after” strategy that could be taken up once the ceasefire talks had succeeded and the war brought to a close.

There were at least two problems with the administration’s decision to pursue a sequential approach that prioritized ceasefire talks over a simultaneous effort to work with Israel and other countries to advance a viable “day after” strategy. The first was the administration’s expectation in January that a sustained ceasefire deal could probably be negotiated within a matter of several weeks, allowing for its implementation before the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in mid-March 2024. That, in hindsight, proved wildly over-optimistic. Instead, the talks have dragged on in fits and starts for the past nine months, with no real ability given the stakes involved – especially the imperative to bring home the hostages – to declare the effort over and trigger Plan B dealing with the “day after.”

A second and more fundamental problem, or at least internal tension, with the U.S. ceasefire push was its underlying, albeit unspoken, objective of permanently ending Israel’s war against Hamas. Any end to hostilities short of thoroughly dismantling not only Hamas’s military capabilities, but also its political power, carried a not-insignificant risk of potentially leaving Hamas positioned to re-assert its rule over Gaza. Such a result, by definition, would negate the chances of ever getting to what the administration insisted was its primary goal: a better “day after” and the establishment of more peaceful civilian administrative and security structure for Gaza that could eventually be a partner in peacemaking with Israel. Certainly, an enduring end to the war in early 2024, as the administration initially hoped to achieve, before the IDF had even secured Rafah and the Egypt-Gaza border (Hamas’s smuggling lifeline to Iran) would have virtually guaranteed a Hamas resurgence.

The Biden administration had several responses to these concerns about their efforts to end the war. The first – that Israel had already achieved all it could militarily against Hamas – seemed questionable on its face. That was certainly the case in the spring of 2024 before the IDF took Rafah, but arguably even today when Israel’s major combat operations appear to be winding down. Even after the killing of Yahya Sinwar, the mastermind of Hamas’s October 7 massacre, extensive work still remains to neutralize Hamas’s vast military infrastructure, especially its tunnel network, as well as the thousands of remaining armed fighters who, left unchecked, are still capable of terrorizing Gaza’s civilian population and thwarting the emergence of any alternative governing structure.

Despite these realities, U.S. officials have repeatedly [spoken](#) to the media, mostly anonymously, [suggesting](#) that the IDF’s military campaign against Hamas had [passed](#) the point of diminishing returns and that the value of further combat operations was not worth the price in terms of lives lost on both sides; bogging down the IDF in a “forever war”; distracting Israel from addressing bigger strategic threats from Iran and Hezbollah; and dangerously weakening Israel’s economy and exacerbating its international isolation.

In presenting his own ceasefire plan in late May 2024, President Biden [declared](#) that it was time for the war to end because Israel had “devastated” Hamas militarily to a point where it “no longer is capable of carrying out another October 7.” Biden warned Israelis that “Indefinite war in pursuit of an unidentified notion of ‘total victory’ . . . will only bog Israel down in Gaza, draining its economic, military, and human resources, and furthering Israel’s isolation in the world.”

For many U.S. officials espousing this view, the prospect that the likely result of an immediate end to the war and IDF withdrawal from Gaza would be Hamas remaining Gaza’s dominant power was an undesirable, but inevitable reality that could perhaps be mitigated (for example, by a stronger security regime along Egypt’s border with Gaza), but not avoided altogether. At times, some in the IDF, eager to be done with Gaza and to focus all Israel’s attention on Hezbollah and Iran, have articulated a similar view. For different reasons, many other Israelis are also [prepared](#) to accept Hamas remaining the governing authority in Gaza if that is the price that must be paid to achieve a rapid ceasefire that ends the ordeal of the hostages.

While sharing the perspective that Israel has done all it can to degrade Hamas militarily, another view maintained by some U.S. officials refuses to cede the point that a rapid ceasefire is necessarily incompatible with achieving a post-Hamas “day after” for Gaza. On the contrary, they argue, a Hamas resurgence can still be avoided and the “day after” advanced precisely by moving the struggle to defeat Hamas from the battlefield to the realm of politics. Once the fighting is over, this theory postulates, putting in place an alternative governing vision for Gaza’s future can itself be the instrument that finishes the job of marginalizing Hamas as a determinative force in Gaza’s future. Indeed, so goes the claim, Hamas is now

sufficiently weakened that it is ready to abandon any responsibility for Gaza's governance and allow a new technocratic government to assume the burden of addressing the vast post-war needs of the population and serve as a more acceptable face for securing international donations for Gaza's reconstruction.

Those who continue to maintain that a definitive defeat of Hamas is the sine qua non for a better "day after" remain deeply skeptical of the notion that a Hamas left intact, even if greatly weakened militarily, can be negotiated out of its role as the dominant player in Gaza's future trajectory. Even were Hamas to agree to surrender its position as the region's de jure governing authority – a role for which it never showed much aptitude or interest – the concern is that, [like Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon, it would still be capable of using its extant power behind the scenes to terrorize and intimidate any technocratic government at sufficient scale to remain the decisive arbiter over the territory's overall strategic posture, especially regarding issues of war and peace with Israel. That outcome, of course, would make any real "day after" Hamas impossible.

For all the policy rationales behind the Biden administration's single-minded focus on negotiating a rapid end to the war, any discussion of its approach would be incomplete without acknowledging that domestic political calculations have also been an important factor at work. During an election year that could be decided by a few thousand votes in a handful of swing states, the potency of Gaza as a source of genuine discontent, verging on rebellion, among small, but important elements of the Democratic Party's electoral coalition was a major source of worry for Biden and his political advisors. The sizable Arab American population in the battleground state of Michigan, as well as a certain segment of progressive college-aged young people, were of special concern. In that context, Biden and his team (no doubt including Vice President Kamala Harris, Biden's successor at the top of the Democratic ticket) viewed a rapid conclusion of the war as the surest means of resolving a serious political liability that they feared, in their worst nightmares, could end up costing Democrats the White House.

Is a Post-Hamas Future Still Relevant?

In light of the failure so far to advance any serious "day after" strategy, it is worth asking if the goal of ending Hamas rule – as desirable as it is – remains a relevant objective given the changing circumstances and priorities of the key stakeholders, principally the United States and Israel. The war has now ground on for more than a year, far longer than anyone could have imagined when it began. In many quarters, war weariness has understandably set in. Ambitious war aims surrounding regime change that seemed achievable and necessary in the immediate weeks and months after Hamas's horrifying attack of October 7 are increasingly cast by many as unrealistic or simply too costly to achieve at acceptable cost. More recently, the escalation in Israel's conflicts with both Hezbollah and Iran is commanding greater and

greater international attention and concern, leaving even less diplomatic bandwidth and energy for coordinating a viable way forward for any “day after” in Gaza.

The killing of Sinwar, Hamas’s leader, in October 2024 significantly bolstered the widespread impulse for ending the war as soon as possible. With the IDF having at last administered justice to the mastermind of October 7, many believed the timing was ripe for Israel to “declare victory.” President Biden quickly seized on Sinwar’s death to [suggest](#) that an “insurmountable obstacle” to a ceasefire had been removed and a new opportunity opened for returning the hostages and “ending this war once and for all.” Vice President Harris [echoed](#) the assessment that the demise of Sinwar “gives us an opportunity to finally end the war in Gaza.”

Of course, as described above, the Biden administration’s drumbeat of pressure on Israel to bring the war to an end in fact preceded Sinwar’s death by many months. When he unveiled his own ceasefire and hostage release plan last May, Biden openly [declared](#) that “It’s time for this war to end.” At that point, there was no accompanying urgency from Biden that it was also critical for Hamas’s domination of Gaza to end as well. Indeed, the talking point demanding that the dismantling of Hamas governance constituted a necessary condition for terminating hostilities had in fact largely disappeared from the administration’s repertoire for most of 2024.

It was therefore somewhat notable that, after Sinwar’s death, both Biden and Harris claimed that it not only offered an opportunity to end the war, but to begin building the “day after” in Gaza “without Hamas in power.” Biden said that “there is now an opportunity for a ‘day after’ in Gaza without Hamas in power, and for a political settlement that provides a better future for Israelis and Palestinians alike.” Harris [echoed](#) the sentiment, claiming that with the killing of Sinwar, “it is time for the day after to begin without Hamas in power.”

Neither, however, explained how the objective of a “day after” without Hamas could possibly be operationalized with thousands of Hamas fighters still on the battlefield vowing to fight on for their extremist cause. Instead, what remains is the underlying impulse to close out the war now because Israel has so thoroughly degraded Hamas militarily that the group will be in no position for a long time, if ever, to threaten another October 7 – even if it still might be in position to intimidate and terrorize the population of Gaza into submission. That said, when challenged on their failure to describe a mechanism for dismantling Hamas rule after IDF operations end, some U.S. officials offer the optimistic view that with the war’s termination, a weakened Hamas – facing a popular backlash to the destruction that its October 7 attack has wrought – can be pressured to negotiate its own marginalization as Gaza’s dominant actor in favor of some internationally-backed interim technocratic administration.

Significant elements in Israel are not far behind in terms of their doubts about the war’s endgame. While ending Hamas governance was an explicit war goal from the beginning,

Israel's national consensus to "finish the job" has clearly weakened as the war has dragged on and its price has steadily mounted – in terms of soldiers killed, the drain on the economy, the stress on the IDF and need to shift focus to more threatening fronts, particularly against Hezbollah and Iran, growing international isolation and, perhaps most significantly, the societal trauma of failing to bring back all the hostages.

Sinwar's killing intensified [public calls](#) in Israel to "declare victory" and do whatever it takes to return the hostages. Reports also [claimed](#) that Israel's security establishment supported the assessment that Sinwar's death had created a unique opportunity to negotiate a ceasefire that would return the hostages and allow the war in Gaza to wind down. Even before Sinwar's end, polling from mid-September 2024 [suggested](#) Israeli Jews are now almost evenly divided on whether to end the war immediately or keep fighting in Gaza. The percentage of Israelis who believe that getting back the hostages should be Israel's top priority is more than double the percentage who prioritize finishing off Hamas, a significant increase since January.

Repeated pronouncements by Israeli officials that the IDF is on the cusp of breaking Hamas ring increasingly hollow to many. Despite a constant string of Israeli battlefield successes that have inflicted massive casualties on Hamas and destroyed most of its organized military units, Hamas' ability to re-group in areas that the IDF vacates, pose a credible threat of long-term insurgency, and maintain a continued level of control over the local population have all fueled calls for Israel to pare back its war aims, declare success, and do whatever is required to end the war, return the hostages, and focus the IDF's energies on larger threats from Lebanon and Iran. The [commencement](#) of a major IDF operation in northern Gaza in October 2024, the third time in the space of a year that Israeli soldiers had been forced to return to the same area in an attempt to stop Hamas from reconstituting, provided added ammunition to the argument that Israel should look to exit the war as soon as possible and avoid getting bogged down.

If that means leaving a severely degraded Hamas in power, the argument goes, so be it. So long as Israel can get sufficient guarantees from Washington that Egypt's porous border with Gaza will be sealed, leaving Hamas with no real access to the outside world and ability to reconstitute its previous military power, Israel's strategic interests will now be better served by closing out the war, withdrawing the vast bulk of its troops and re-focusing attention on healing Israel's internal rifts and giving the IDF a chance to re-focus its energies on returning tens of thousands of Israelis displaced for nearly a year from their homes near the Lebanese border and a possible war with Iran. In the meantime, Israel can strengthen its border defenses along Gaza's perimeter and act preemptively whenever Hamas shows signs of regathering its strength.

Importantly, while the rising sentiment and pressure to wind down the Gaza war is real, Israel's government has yet to change its official war aims. Specifically, Sinwar's death does not seem to have altered the government's determination to end Hamas rule. On the

contrary, there is reason to believe that within both the government as well as the sizable part of the population it represents, there remains a strong conviction that the high costs of the war to date can only be truly redeemed by ensuring that it will never have to be fought again. That means destroying Hamas in the truest sense of the word by ending once and for all its ability to rule in Gaza. That view was reflected in Prime Minister Netanyahu's statement after Sinwar was killed. Netanyahu declared that "Hamas will not rule in Gaza again." Rather than focus on any renewed opportunity to negotiate a ceasefire with Hamas, Netanyahu instead saw Sinwar's removal as an opportunity to solicit Hamas's surrender, [saying](#) that "Those who put down their weapons and leave our hostages, we will allow them to come out and live."

From the standpoint of those in Israel arguing to continue the war, there is the entirely plausible concern that leaving Hamas intact, however weakened, is simply setting the stage for the next war, if not in fact for another October 7. Indeed, for Hamas, even with Sinwar gone, survival itself remains the definition of victory. If Hamas is left standing after having perpetrated the worst attack in Israel's history, and after having absorbed nearly a year's-worth of the hardest blows that the IDF is capable of delivering, it is not hard to imagine how it and the Iranian axis of resistance could spin Israel's retreat from the goal of "annihilating Hamas" into a narrative of historic triumph, ordained by God and the prelude to even greater victories to come on the way to Israel's eventual destruction. Further, these critics of downgrading Israel's war aims warn, history teaches that once Israeli forces withdraw from territory, returning later to resume operations is much easier said than done.

The strongest version of this continued Israeli resolve to mid-wife a post-Hamas era in Gaza was [delivered](#) in late September 2024 during Netanyahu's speech to the United Nations General Assembly. After describing the IDF's enormous success destroying Hamas's military capabilities, Netanyahu acknowledged that "the terrorists still exercise some governing power in Gaza," but went on to declare "[T]his too has to end, and we're working to bring it to an end." As explained by Netanyahu "if Hamas stays in power, it will regroup, rearm, and attack Israel again and again, as it has vowed to do, so Hamas has to go." To those arguing that ridding Gaza of Hamas was unrealistic, Netanyahu retorted:

Imagine in a post-war situation after World War II, allowing defeated Nazis in 1945 to rebuild Germany? It's inconceivable. It's ridiculous. It didn't happen then and it's not going to happen now.

Netanyahu concluded by declaring:

This is why Israel will reject any role for Hamas in a post-war Gaza. We don't seek to resettle Gaza. What we seek is a demilitarized and de-radicalized Gaza. Only then can we ensure that this round of fighting will be the last round of fighting. We are ready to

work with regional and other partners to support a local civilian administration in Gaza committed to peaceful coexistence.

A Possible Path Toward the “Day After”

Taking Netanyahu at his word that Israel will continue resisting mounting pressures to stop short of Hamas’s defeat, the concept of a real “day after” will retain its policy relevance and importance. At some point, to avoid either a vacuum that a resurrected Hamas or even worse elements can fill, as well as the backlash of growing international accusations that Israel’s hidden purpose is Gaza’s reoccupation, serious efforts will need to commence to build an alternative administration in Gaza that offers Palestinians and Israelis the chance for a more peaceful and secure future. Such an effort, importantly, would also help advance core U.S. interests in weakening Iran and its axis of resistance, bolstering regional stability, and renewing progress toward greater integration and cooperation between Israel and its most powerful Arab neighbors.

For now, with no agreed-upon “day after” plan close to being in place and the IDF still operating in Gaza for the foreseeable future, the plan proposed by the JINSA/Vandenberg Task Force certainly remains pertinent to discussions of how best to jumpstart the transition from Hamas control to a more hopeful future.

Key Task Force Assumptions

The Task Force’s recommendations were based on several assumption that are worth setting out in greater detail. A first assumption seems self-obvious. It was that, in order to have any chance of building a better “day after” in Gaza, Hamas’s military and governing capabilities need to be thoroughly defeated and dismantled. If Hamas retained a residual ability to intimidate and terrorize the local population on a wide scale, as well as control distribution of life-sustaining goods like food and water, the Task Force posited that any “day after” would be impossible to achieve. That is why the Task Force had deep concerns about U.S. efforts that seemed to have the clear objective of ending the war prematurely, well before the IDF had completed the time-consuming task of defeating all of Hamas’s military battalions, cutting off its lines of re-supply, eliminating its leadership, and neutralizing its vast military infrastructure both above and below ground.

A second assumption that the Task Force worked from was that the job of destroying Hamas’s military capabilities would only be done by the IDF. It ruled out the possibility that any other national force – from the United States, Europe, or the Arab world – would have the will or interests to commit their own troops to fight and die in Gaza and do the hard work necessary to degrade Hamas’s military and political arms sufficiently to set the conditions for transitioning to a new civil reality. Even more emphatically, the Task Force had zero faith that

security forces loyal to the PA were up to the task, having proven on a near-daily basis that they were largely incapable of suppressing Hamas terror cells in the PA's West Bank stronghold. It was folly to think that PA troops could somehow quickly return to Gaza and impose some semblance of order 17 years after they had been so unceremoniously (and easily) evicted by Hamas's ruthless 2007 coup.

A third assumption: The IDF would need significant time and space to complete the job of defeating Hamas militarily. It was already apparent on the Task Force's first visit to Israel in late 2023 that the scope of Hamas's tunnel networks and other military infrastructure was far larger than Israel had realized at the war's outset. Even after dismantling Hamas's organized military battalions and moving to a lower intensity of combat operations, it was clear that an IDF presence would be required in Gaza for a substantial period of time, conducting intelligence-driven raids to destroy residual ad-hoc terror cells and neutralize tunnels and other military infrastructure. It was obvious from early on that the war to defeat Hamas would last far longer than nearly all Israel's prior wars – perhaps well into 2025 or beyond, albeit eventually at a much-reduced tempo of conflict that would eventually look more like periodic in-and-out IDF counter-terrorism raids in the West Bank.

A fourth assumption concerned the strategic role that humanitarian assistance would play in the conflict in at least two important respects. First, based on past experience, the Task Force believed that the greater the humanitarian suffering of innocent Gazans, the less time and space the IDF would have to do what was necessary to defeat Hamas. Pictures of starving and malnourished Palestinian children inevitably would mobilize immense pressures internationally as well as in the United States to end the war prematurely before Hamas's military and governing power could be destroyed. That conclusion was bolstered by repeated [threats](#) from the Biden administration to suspend the delivery of critical military supplies if Israel did not markedly [improve](#) the flow of humanitarian goods into Gaza.

Indeed, that imperative to “end the suffering” at any cost has been a driving force behind the Biden administration's relentless ceasefire efforts since early 2024. The Task Force believed that the more that could be done to address the relief and recovery needs of suffering Palestinians, the better positioned the IDF would be to continue operations deemed necessary to defeat a terrorist group that had perpetrated the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust, and thereby increase the odds for a successful implementation of any “day after” effort.

A second critical way in which the Task Force understood that humanitarian aid represented a strategic factor in the war was the critical role it played in helping undergird Hamas control over the population in Gaza. Hamas used its influence over aid channels to meet its own needs, earn significant revenues on the black market, reward loyalists, recruit new fighters, and keep the rest of the population cowed and dependent. The existing humanitarian aid agencies working in Gaza were either incapable of confronting Hamas's influence over

distribution or, as in the case of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), often complicit with it.

One recent Israeli analysis [judged](#) that the failure to establish alternative channels of distribution for aid was in fact “the main reason preventing the complete destruction of Hamas’s military and governmental capabilities.” Similarly, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [told](#) the United Nations in September 2024 that Hamas terrorists,

still exercise some governing power in Gaza by stealing the food that we enable aid agencies to bring into Gaza.... They feed their bellies and then they fill their coffers with money they extort from their own people. They sell the stolen food at exorbitant prices and that’s how they stay in power.

The Task Force early on in its deliberations concluded that breaking Hamas’s stranglehold by establishing an alternative channel for the delivery of essential services was in fact a key center of gravity in the struggle to undermine and destroy Hamas rule and start the process of laying the foundation for a new civilian administration in Gaza.

A fifth and final assumption that guided the Task Force’s work was the importance of having Washington’s Arab partners play a key role in any “day after” strategy. On top of being convinced that any permanent re-occupation of Gaza by Israel would be contrary to U.S. interests, the Task Force saw the Arab states bringing unique assets to the challenge of building any post-Hamas Gaza, including significant financial resources, legitimacy, and influence both internationally and with the Palestinians, and a deep stake collectively in seeing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict stabilized and eventually resolved.

Critically, several Arab states – the Saudis, Emiratis, and Moroccans among them – also have unparalleled experience in de-radicalizing their own societies by expunging narratives of hate, intolerance, and extremism formerly taught in their schools, preached in their mosques, and communicated through their state-controlled media platforms. Precisely such a multi-year program, the Task Force agreed, would need to be an essential pre-requisite for Gaza’s future after almost two decades of Hamas’s ideological poison (preceded by the equally hate-filled indoctrination of the PLO) being mainlined into the minds of successive generations of Palestinians.

The International Trust for Gaza Relief and Reconstruction

The Task Force’s recommendation for the United States and its key Arab partners to establish a private multilateral entity, the International Trust for Gaza Relief and Reconstruction, to serve as the primary instrument for jumpstarting the transition to a post-Hamas “day after” very much flowed from these assumptions.

The Task Force believed that the effort to build an alternative civilian structure to Hamas needed to commence as soon as feasible – even as the IDF continued conducting lethal operations throughout Gaza for an extended period of time. The first priority of such an effort would be alleviating the suffering of innocent Palestinians through the delivery of humanitarian aid – food, water, medicine, and temporary housing – to parts of Gaza where Hamas’s organized military units had been sufficiently weakened by the IDF. By doing so, the Trust would not only be helping to address one of the major international critiques of Israel’s military operations (a budding humanitarian crisis), but it would also be undercutting one of the main pillars of Hamas’s continued political control over the population. As progress was made, the Trust could subsequently begin helping to clear rubble, repair critical infrastructure, restore essential services, begin building a transitional civilian administration, train and equip new local police forces, and commence the arduous work of long-term economic reconstruction and societal recovery and rehabilitation.

The mechanism of the Trust was also designed to relieve the IDF of the burden of addressing the huge civilian needs of Gaza – a task it clearly did not want, could not afford, and for which it was ill-suited to succeed given the natural antipathy of the local population. Involving the pragmatic Arab states in the effort was clearly a preferable option. But the Task Force recognized the clear tension that exists between the desire to get America’s Arab partners far more deeply engaged in “day after” efforts and their obvious discomfort with doing so at a time when the IDF is still conducting security operations in Gaza for the foreseeable future. Opening themselves up to charges from Iran, other extremists, and even their own publics of “providing cover” for Israel’s war was clearly a sensitive matter for Arab governments.

The mechanism of the Trust was designed to reduce this tension by providing these states with a degree of separation and even plausible deniability from the immediate “day after” efforts. Rather than being forced to put their own sovereignty directly into the line of fire alongside the IDF at the start, these states would instead act indirectly by supporting the establishment of a separate private entity – a super-NGO in effect – that would have its own independent board, employees, and contractors. The Trust and its board, rather than the President of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) or the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, would in the first instance be responsible and accountable for its actions to assist Palestinians in need.

The Task Force also believed that Arab entry into the effort would be made easier given the Trust’s immediate focus on addressing the humanitarian needs of innocent Gazans rather than any larger and more detailed political project for post-Hamas governance that could become a poison pill for one side or the other. For the broader Arab world, efforts spearheaded by fellow Arabs to mitigate Palestinian suffering in wartime had a motherhood and apple pie quality that most citizens might intuitively support, and critics would find harder to oppose.

Indeed, several Arab states, led by Jordan and the UAE, have had small, but active national efforts on the humanitarian front since the war's early days, including an actual presence on the ground in parts of Gaza. Other Arab countries have similarly sent their own aid shipments to Egypt and Jordan for delivery into Gaza. Not only have these efforts not triggered any large-scale domestic opposition, but they have also often been heralded publicly by these governments as a means of highlighting their work to alleviate the suffering of Palestinians. The fact that these efforts have been quietly coordinated with the IDF even as major combat operations rage does not appear to have been a significant issue. What the Trust proposed to do was bring together and dramatically scale up these disparate national programs into a concerted multilateral campaign.

The Task Force plan also envisioned the Trust having an advisory council of qualified Palestinians with relevant knowledge, experience, and influence in Gaza – both to help design, guide, and facilitate its programs on the ground and to enhance its legitimacy with the local population and internationally. Primarily for legitimacy reasons as well, and to further ease the way for Arab state engagement, the Task Force recommended that an effort be made by the Trust and its sponsors to gain the blessing for their initial efforts (but not active participation) of the PA, and to link the Trust's work to a diplomatic formula agreed upon with Israel setting out the vision of a long-term conditions-based pathway toward a possible two-state solution. The Task Force emphasized that transformational (vice cosmetic) reform of the PA and deradicalization of Palestinian society would need to be sine qua nons of any such process.

Options for Security

The second critical component of the Task Force's recommendations concerned security. Any effort to undermine and defeat Hamas's control over Gaza's population, and eventually build an alternative to it that would be prepared to live in peace with Israel, will inevitably be viewed by Hamas's armed remnants as a mortal threat to their extremist project and power. Israel's early efforts after October 7 to work with local Gazan clan leaders to erode Hamas's grip on the distribution channels for aid quickly ended in failure when those leaders were immediately murdered by Hamas.

President Biden's disastrous effort to establish a maritime channel for the delivery of humanitarian assistance was also a cautionary tale. [Announced](#) to great fanfare during Biden's March State of the Union address, the effort to build a temporary pier off Gaza's coast was [doomed](#) from the start by the entirely foreseeable vagaries of the Eastern Mediterranean's high seas. Importantly, however, the tiny amounts of aid that did make it to shore faced the same fatally compromised distribution challenges as have all land-based traffic into Gaza since October 7: the absence of security during the so-called "last mile" of distribution to ensure the safe delivery of aid to intended recipients free of influence by Hamas and its associated criminal networks. Even if Biden's pier had survived its unfortunate

encounter with Gaza's coastal swells, the administration's failure to provide even the semblance of a solution to the fundamental security challenges facing aid distribution doomed the effort's strategic efficacy.

The Task Force recognized from the start that, to have any chance of succeeding, the Trust's operations would require a viable security component. Several possible models were studied, including those most frequently offered in "day after" plans put forward by other think tanks as well as those discussed by U.S. officials.

Several were relatively easily dismissed. The IDF already had its hands full, in the first instance defanging Hamas, but also in terms of its intensifying conflict with both Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran itself. Assuming control over aid distribution and the establishment of a new civilian administration would be a huge additional drain on Israel's resources, logistics, and manpower. Securing a post-Hamas transition was neither a role the IDF sought nor one for which it was suited – not least due to the opposition that any whiff of re-occupation would invariably generate among Palestinians and those pragmatic Arab states expected to play leading roles in establishing the Trust.

U.S. forces, though enormously capable, were also quickly ruled out. President Biden's [assurance](#) that "no U.S. boots will be on the ground" when announcing his ill-fated Gaza pier accurately reflected a strong bipartisan consensus in Washington against putting more American troops into harm's way in the Middle East. Existing U.S. deployments in the region, on top of expanding global responsibilities countering peer competitors in China and Russia, were already stressing U.S. military capacity. It was also no secret that U.S. soldiers would be an especially enticing target for Hamas and its Iranian backers. Finally, having U.S. troops securing humanitarian operations in such close proximity to IDF forces conducting lethal attacks on Hamas created too much risk of misunderstanding, tensions, and even accidental clashes that could damage the critical U.S.-Israel strategic partnership. Certainly, Hamas and Iran would do everything in their power to exploit such risks.

Any significant role for a United Nations force was also viewed with deep skepticism. It was hard to conceive that the Security Council would authorize such a mission without first demanding that the IDF cease operations and withdraw. Equally inconceivable was that Israel would rely on UN forces to safeguard its security from threats emanating from Gaza. Especially after October 7, but even before it, the spectacular failure of UN peacekeepers in Lebanon to fulfill their mission of keeping Hezbollah's military away from Israel's border had soured Israel on ever again depending upon the international body to play a major role in protecting Israel's security interests. Compounding the problem was ample [evidence](#) uncovered by the IDF after October 7 that the [ranks](#) and [operations](#) of the UN's most important civilian body in Gaza, UNRWA, had been infiltrated by Hamas, up to and including [commanders](#) of Hamas's special forces who directly participated in the massacre of Israelis.

Security forces from the PA also offered few immediate prospects. Setting aside that Israel's right-wing government was adamantly opposed to having an unreconstructed PA play a leading role in post-Hamas Gaza, there was nothing to suggest that the PA would be willing to enter Gaza absent a full IDF withdrawal. There was even less reason to think that PA troops could, in the short term, secure the operations of a new civilian administration in Gaza. After all, PA forces had repeatedly failed over the last decade to maintain security in key cities of their West Bank strongholds in the face of Hamas challenges. The idea that they would be up to the job of combatting Hamas remnants in Gaza seemed outright fanciful, especially in light of the PA's own [inability](#) to condemn Hamas's October 7 massacre and its open [mourning](#) of Sinwar as a "martyr."

Perhaps the most popular short-term security solution advanced for the "day after" in Gaza involved troops from Arab states who are at peace with Israel. Most frequently, there were regular reports that the UAE was prepared to volunteer for such a role. Under what conditions was not entirely clear, but a lasting ceasefire and a major role for a reformed PA seemed critical elements. The Task Force found it difficult to imagine Emirati or other Arab soldiers deploying to Gaza while IDF forces continued to conduct lethal operations against Hamas remnants. Equally hard to fathom was that the Arab states would be ready to insert their national forces into an environment where Hamas terror cells continued to resist the establishment of any new authority, likely requiring them to kill fellow Arabs in significant numbers against the widespread sympathies of their own domestic populations.

Even if all these hurdles could be overcome, the Task Force had profound concerns about the wisdom of sending troops from Israel's Arab peace partners into an area where the IDF would almost certainly still be conducting aggressive raids into Gaza whenever deemed necessary for Israel's security. In such a fraught environment, the chances of an accidental clash between Israeli and Arab forces that could fatally undermine the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords or any of Israel's other peace treaties seemed far too big a risk to run.

Having deemed the most frequently discussed options for a post-Hamas transition as unrealistic, not viable, too risky or some combination of the three, the Task Force examined other possibilities. One was for the Trust to solicit support from third countries outside the Middle East with highly capable professional militaries and on excellent terms with Israel and the IDF. Several countries in Central Europe, such as Poland, potentially fit the bill. So, too, might Gorkha forces from India. That said, it was very difficult to imagine any of these states seeing their national interests served by sending their sovereign forces into Gaza's maelstrom. Certainly, none to date have given any indication that they are eager to step up and serve.

Another option examined was local Gazans with security backgrounds. Perhaps most obvious were former PA police trained by the United States who had served prior to being forcibly retired following Hamas's violent takeover of Gaza in 2007. Numbering in the tens of

thousands, most remain on the payroll of the PA. However, best estimates were that at most two to three thousand may still be capable of resuming their former duties. Whether the Israeli government could find a way to overlook their former PA affiliation was a large question mark. Whether they, or the PA, would be prepared to take on the challenge in the immediate shadow of the IDF's continued operations against Hamas also seemed extremely doubtful.

A second possible group of local Gazans were individuals who had served as police under the Hamas regime, but who could prove through a strict vetting process (with Israeli participation) that they were capable of loyally serving a new civilian administration. There was no way of knowing how large a cadre this might be, but the Task Force had very low expectations that such a group existed in sufficient numbers or with adequate training to secure the Trust's operations effectively. Once again, also looming large was the very low likelihood that many Palestinians would be willing to deploy for such a mission while Israeli soldiers remained active in Gaza.

Private Security Companies (PSCs)

Having dismissed the viability of the most frequently discussed options, the Task Force report recommended a new possibility for consideration that no previous study had yet advanced: using private security companies (PSCs) to fill the security void and help kick-start a post-Hamas transition. The ranks of many of these firms are filled with extremely well-trained professional soldiers who formerly served at elite levels in their nations' militaries, including from the United States, Great Britain, France, Poland, Romania, Colombia, Australia, the Philippines, and Georgia.

Many PSCs have lengthy experience working in difficult conflict zones in support of the U.S. and other Western militaries during the war on terror, including in the Middle East. The kinds of essential tasks required by the Trust's initial set of operations – protecting humanitarian convoys, guarding critical infrastructure, manning checkpoints and facility perimeters, securing VIPs – are all missions with which these companies have significant experience. These firms are also well acquainted with the imperative of coordinating their activities closely with a national military force in overall control of the battlespace, which in the case of Gaza would be the IDF for the time being.

The Task Force was very aware of the objections that would inevitably arise to the idea of using PSCs in Gaza. At the top of the list were the highly publicized historical cases of abuse and corruption associated with specific PSCs. The [Wagner mercenary group](#), an instrument of Russian state power and avarice, was perhaps the most notorious example for whom such behaviors were standard operating procedures. Among Western PSCs, there was perhaps most famously the 2007 incident in Iraq known as the [Nisour Square massacre](#) involving the American company Blackwater. Fourteen innocent Iraqis were shot dead by Blackwater

contractors providing convoy protection to a U.S. embassy team in the aftermath of a suspected terrorist incident. Four Blackwater employees, two former U.S. Marines and two former Army soldiers, were tried in the United States, convicted, and sentenced to long prison terms. All were subsequently [pardoned](#) by President Donald Trump in 2020.

With the Blackwater case in mind, the Task Force spoke at length with U.S. military officials who in 2007 were subsequently put in charge of cleaning up the situation with regard to PSCs in Iraq. These officials readily acknowledged that prior to the Nisour Square shooting “things had been a mess,” with no systematic oversight being exercised by the U.S. military over up to 40 PSCs under their purview. “A Wild West show” was how the situation was characterized.

After Nisour Square, however, a strict system of licensing, rules of engagement, monitoring, and accountability were instituted. Every PSC mission was pre-approved by and coordinated with the U.S. military and tracked in real time. If incidents occurred, a PSC’s activity would be suspended until a review could be completed. Financial penalties, license revocation, loss of contract, expulsion from the theater, and even referral for criminal prosecution were all real possibilities for misconduct.

According to these U.S. officials, once these critical remedial measures were introduced and enforced, the oversight framework for PSCs worked extraordinarily well, with PSCs successfully performing tasks essential to the overall U.S. mission. These officials opined that provided the Trust was able to impose a similarly rigorous system of oversight and accountability for PSCs in Gaza, these companies were certainly capable of effectively supporting the key tasks that would be the immediate focus of the Trust’s operations, including securing humanitarian aid delivery against terrorists, guarding temporary housing encampments, critical infrastructure sites, and work teams repairing essential services and clearing rubble, and protecting any newly emerging civilian administration.

In evaluating the concerns associated with PSCs, the Task Force noted during its deliberations that such problems are by no means restricted to PSCs. Instances of abuse and corruption have afflicted many national militaries deployed in foreign conflict zones, including even the United States, probably the most professional armed force in the world. As for UN peacekeeping operations, there have been repeated reports over the years of missions [plagued](#) by extensive fraud, mismanagement, corruption, and [sex crimes](#). The bottom line is that absent leadership and a strict oversight regime that enforces standards of professionalism and accountability, the risk that abuses will occur are significantly heightened – regardless of whether the force happens to be employed by a private company or a UN member state.

Indeed, there is a serious argument to be made that when things do go wrong, as inevitably they will in wartime, especially in theaters involving terrorists who wear no uniform, use civilians as human shields, and observe no laws of armed conflict, it may in fact be easier,

politically speaking, to manage the fallout associated with accidents or misbehavior by PSCs than national armies. The latter almost automatically implicate sensitive issues touching on national honor, saving face, and high-stakes diplomacy. If a PSC or its personnel cause problems, on the other hand, they can be disciplined, penalized, and removed from the battlespace with far more dispatch and far less blowback and friction.

The Task Force’s proposal that the Trust should look to hiring PSCs to protect its initial humanitarian operations in the absence of adequate troops from other countries was received with interest by governments briefed on the idea, first and foremost in the region, but even among certain U.S. officials – especially those with previous positive experiences working alongside Western PSCs in conflict zones. Within both the Israeli and Emirati governments, the Task Force learned that significant work has already gone into studying the role that PSCs could play in Gaza. For their part, the Emiratis are known to have substantial experience working with security contractors in the past. One well-sourced [report](#) from July 2024 indicated that after recent “day after” discussions in Abu Dhabi involving senior officials from Israel, the United States, and the UAE, the Emiratis circulated a proposal for a Gaza “stabilization mandate” that would involve troops not only from Arab states and select non-regional countries, but PSCs as well – which the article appropriately characterized as “potentially controversial.”

Assuming the Trust contracted with PSCs to help protect its initial operations, it would need to establish a security unit, headed preferably by retired Western flag officers, that would oversee managing and monitoring PSC activity. Detailed agreements would have to be negotiated addressing critical issues like pre-deployment training, screening of personnel, applicable legal regime and accountability, command and control, and rules of engagement. The Trust’s security element would need to establish a continuous and close system of coordination, cooperation, communication, and deconfliction with the IDF, including sharing intelligence and situational awareness – perhaps through a joint operations center in Israel. In emergency situations, the Trust’s security force would also likely need an arrangement for the IDF to provide it a Quick Reaction Force.

Conclusion

Anyone who spends any time delving into questions concerning Gaza’s “day after” quickly discovers that there are no easy or good answers. The situation is fraught with enormous political, ideological, economic, and security challenges. The odds are heavily stacked against any plan succeeding. The daunting difficulty of the task no doubt helps explain why after more than a year of war, neither the United States nor Israel, nor any other likely stakeholder in Gaza’s future, has invested the diplomatic capital and energy required to forge a viable way forward.

For its part, Israel has chosen, for a variety of reasons, to focus nearly all its energies on the military mission of defeating Hamas that – as this paper has argued – is the sine qua non for a post-Hamas future to stand any chance of success. The United States, on the other hand, decided very early in 2024 to throw all its diplomatic chips behind a nearly year-long fruitless effort to negotiate a ceasefire and hostage deal with Hamas, even though doing so increased the risk that Hamas in some weakened form might survive to fight another day. While Israel's imperative to get back the hostages required it to work closely with Washington in these efforts, the tension between the government's declared goals vis-à-vis Hamas and the Biden administration's determination to end the war in short order were real. Either way, neither side's main line of effort has been directed toward executing a concerted strategy to begin the transition toward a better "day after" in Gaza.

However, assuming Israel remains resolved to defeat Hamas rule in Gaza, avoid calls to re-establish Israeli rule in Gaza, and that the IDF's efforts are not cut short by a premature end to the war that leaves Hamas standing, the imperative of addressing the "day after," and establishing an alternative administration prepared to co-exist with Israel remains as relevant today as it was on October 8, 2023.

On that basis, this paper has argued that the key proposals put forward by the JINSA/Vandenberg Task Force may still be capable of making a significant contribution to jump starting the transition to a post-Hamas future until a new Palestinian leadership, government, and police force can be stood up. The creation of a well-resourced private Trust focused on establishing independent channels for addressing Gaza's humanitarian needs could help undermine the central pillar of Hamas's ongoing control over the population, while providing the most powerful Arab states who share Israel's interest in weakening the Iranian axis an acceptable humanitarian cover for deepening their influence in Gaza even while IDF "mopping up" operations continue into 2025.

From that initial foothold providing relief, the Trust could then gradually expand its activities over time to a range of other essential short and medium-term tasks, including helping to nurture a new civilian administration and training a new police force. On the essential question of security, facing a reality where very few countries are likely to put their own soldiers into harm's way confronting deadly Hamas remnants in Gaza's badlands, the Task Force's suggestion of using PSCs in the near term to protect the Trust's essential operations offers an intensely practical solution to what is obviously an extremely vexing challenge.

The Task Force would be the first to acknowledge that its proposals are not perfect. They certainly do not pretend to provide comprehensive answers to what Gaza’s ultimate “day after” will look like. What they may offer, however, is a more workable and realistic path forward to finally begin the transition toward a post-Hamas era on terms that most of the key stakeholders, with all their conflicting interests and requirements, may be able to accept. After more than a year of war with no visible progress, it may well be time to abandon the search for the perfect “day after” plan that comprehensively solves every problem in favor of a “good enough” solution that provides a way to get started on the practical work of building a better future for Gaza.