

The Day After: A Plan For Gaza





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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 Gazan 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.

II. Findings

Finding 1: Israel's Transformation

Overview

The Biden administration's immediate, unequivocal, and consistent support for Israel's self-defense since October 7 has been commendable and vital. This support was especially noteworthy amid countervailing international and domestic pressures as Israel's Gaza campaign has persisted month after month – and as the brutal realities and human tragedy of high-intensity urban warfare, against a deeply entrenched terrorist army that uses civilians as human shields, are beamed 24/7 to a shocked global audience.

At the same time, there are certain hard realities and transformations in Israel after October 7. There is unprecedented national determination to thoroughly dismantle Hamas's military and governance capabilities and ensure that no similar terrorist threat can ever arise again in Gaza. There is also profound skepticism across Israel's political spectrum toward a two-state solution and any hope for peaceful accommodation with the current Palestinian political leadership.

October 7: A Categorically Different Threat

It is difficult to overstate Israel's trauma from the horrors of October 7 and the transformational effect on the country's approach to the threats embodied by Hamas and other Iran-backed groups with clear intent to destroy it. The core premise of modern Zionism – that Jews will be able to exercise self-determination and live safely in their own homeland defended by a strong state and army, no longer powerless against those who reject their very existence – has been shaken to its foundations. Beyond that day's atrocities, this remains painfully evident in the ghost towns and desolated kibbutzim that now exist not only in Israel's south, but also in the north where the forces of another Iranian proxy, Hezbollah, menace Israel with capabilities that dwarf those of Hamas. All told, nearly 200,000 Israelis have been internally displaced, living as exiles in their own country, afraid to return to their homes until the untenable threats in Gaza and Lebanon are addressed.

Even if the dangers now clearly posed by Hamas do not in and of themselves threaten Israel's existence, and despite Israel's overwhelming military superiority, there is new-found national consensus that the conflict with Hamas does threaten the country's core national security interests and carries existential implications well beyond the ongoing operation in Gaza. Israel's displaced citizens cannot return to their communities, and it cannot maintain its identity and promise, unless the group responsible for perpetrating the worst massacre of Jews in a single day since the Holocaust is effectively destroyed, and all those in the Iranian axis and beyond see definitive proof of the fate that awaits anyone else foolish enough to act upon their desire to eradicate the Jewish state.

Trying to understand October 7 primarily through the lens of the surprise 1973 Yom Kippur War, while perhaps logical, risks obscuring or understating the monumental impact and far-reaching implications of that day for Israel's sense of national insecurity going forward. Coming exactly fifty years and one day after the Egyptian-Syrian surprise offensives, October 7 likewise delivered a strategic shock that erased Israel's sanguine prewar assumptions about its enemies in a single stroke, and raised serious questions about the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) preparedness.

Yet the differences between October 1973 and October 2023 are even greater. For all the lasting military, political, economic, and psychological damage inflicted five decades ago, the brunt of that violence was borne by Israeli soldiers in conventional warfare on the Sinai and Golan frontiers. Israel was outnumbered on the battlefield, but the worst of that crisis passed in a matter of days as the IDF reasserted its military superiority and gained the upper hand by the time of the ceasefire.

Unlike any other moment in modern Israeli history, October 7 has shaken Israel's sense of identity to the core, evoking memories of some of the most horrific events in millennia of Jewish history. In one day, more than a thousand Israelis, mostly civilians, were massacred intentionally and indiscriminately in their own homes and streets by death squads from Hamas's al-Nukhba assault forces, and by a spontaneous follow-on

wave of Gazan civilians, that evoked memories of Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* and Russian Cossacks. As one Israeli scholar reflected, “The moment a pogrom against Jews takes place in the Jewish state, the Zionist state, both the state and Zionism are testifying to their own failure. Because the idea underlying the establishment of Zionist state was to prevent a situation like that in which Jews in the Diaspora find themselves.”²

This deeply personal and human insecurity is worsened by the IDF’s excruciating failure to respond in those crucial hours after the attack commenced – despite the fact that Hamas openly exercised its battleplans in advance, amassed its forces, and launched its attack mere miles from Israeli towns and villages. That hundreds of Israeli civilians were abducted, transported back to Gaza, and held as hostages and human shields by a terrorist group has traumatized Israeli society. As of this writing, Israel has only been able to secure the release of fewer than half of the hostages – and only by bartering a higher number of incarcerated Palestinians. The inability of the Israeli government and military to prevent the hostages’ abduction or secure their release is a daily challenge to Israelis’ sense of personal security in their own homeland. Its impact cannot be overstated.

For the first time in Israeli history, each pillar of its national security has cracked: not just early warning and deterrence as in 1973, but the essential social contract and ethos that Israelis can live securely anywhere in their own country in full confidence that the IDF will be there to protect them. This is reflected in polling conducted for this study that demonstrates the IDF’s lost standing among majorities of Israelis across the political spectrum, with 86 percent overall reporting a great deal or some damage in their faith in the IDF. One Israeli interviewed for this project captured the national sentiment this way: “Israelis knew they could die in a war defending their country; they didn’t think they could ever again be murdered in pogroms.”³

Israel’s Transformed Approach to Gaza

The searing traumas of the attacks by Hamas’s al-Nukhba forces – and by Gazan civilians in their wake – are a watershed moment for Israel’s conception of its security, centered on the conviction that the Zionist project itself will be in doubt if fails to convert its strategic defeat on October 7 into a lasting strategic victory. In the face of a deadly attack by a hostile military and political force that still asserts its intent to destroy the Jewish state, and in the face of the widespread support Hamas’s attack received in word and deed from Gazan civilians, Israelis have unified around the need for a new approach with an altogether new set of security requirements. In addition to securing the release of the remaining hostages, Israel now seeks to destroy Hamas as a coherent military and governing force capable of controlling Gaza’s territory, population, and resources – an almost uniquely ambitious objective in the IDF’s combat-intense history. Equally striking, Israel’s body politic is largely united behind what it sees as a just and necessary war to eliminate the culprits of October 7, rebuild shattered deterrence against Iran and other hostile actors with even more threatening capabilities than Hamas, address the

radicalization that drove many Gazans and West Bankers to openly celebrate the attack, and restore Israelis' bond with the IDF and their faith that they can safely settle and raise families anywhere in their country.

In almost every respect, this represents a marked departure from Israel's past practice and assumptions about Hamas and Gaza, and about the larger purposes of its military operations. For the first time in the country's history, it is intentionally and explicitly undertaking what it knows will be a long war to accomplish nothing less than the effective destruction of an adversary's entire political and military structure in its own territory. Israel did not pursue such an outcome in its resoundingly decisive Six-Day War of 1967, nor in the 1973 Yom Kippur conflict that featured some of the biggest battles in modern Middle East history. It certainly never tried to actually remove Hamas from power in Gaza before October 7, despite fighting several previous wars over a decade and a half as Hamas steadily improved its capabilities. Amid the feel-good boom of Start-Up Nation and the far more strategically significant threats from Iran and Hezbollah, Israel spent the eighteen years after its 2005 unilateral withdrawal from Gaza trying instead to contain Hamas and other extremist groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ; also backed by Tehran). Israel muddled through with a mix of deterrence, economic incentives, technological superiority, and limited, mostly standoff, military operations to "mow the lawn" and dissuade Hamas for as long as possible from attacking again. Throughout, it avowedly treated the terrorist group as the *de facto* responsible ruling authority – the "return address" – in Gaza, and never conducted military operations with the intent of fundamentally altering that status.

This concept worked well enough – until catastrophically it didn't. Across at least seven rounds of kinetic conflict from 2008 to mid-2023, Israel had no overwhelming need to reevaluate its approach. For every new arrow in Hamas's quiver – rockets, tunnels, and assault units of every type – Israel sought better ways to defeat the arrows, but not the archer. It countered effectively enough with sophisticated air defenses, underground barriers, smart fences, and precision targeting, all undergirded by cutting-edge technologies and intelligence dominance. At the same time, however, this self-assuredness – that Israel could readily detect, absorb, and counter whatever Hamas threw at it – slowly bred a fatal complacency that only became apparent in awful hindsight.

The attack of October 7 punctured this misplaced confidence and invalidated every assumption underpinning it. Hamas was undeterred from launching such a large-scale and brutal offensive, despite the stick of a massive Israeli response and the carrots of Qatari cash and lucrative permits for Gazans to work in Israel. It managed to prepare and conduct a brigade-sized combined-arms assault that achieved tactical and strategic surprise by circumventing or deceiving Israel's impressive, but highly technology-dependent, intelligence apparatus and defensive arrays along the border. And ultimately, it nullified the notion that threats from Gaza could comfortably be defeated at minimal cost because the IDF would always interpose itself between Hamas and the Israeli populace.

These lessons and shocks to the system are internalized and reflected in the fundamentally different goals and means of Israel's current Gaza campaign, called Operation Swords of Iron. For the first time ever, the Israeli government has a clear domestic political mandate to eliminate Hamas as the military and governing entity in Gaza, and to ensure it can never revive to anything like the level needed to launch another October 7-style assault. Indeed, in a clear reversal from all prior Gaza conflicts, polling conducted seven weeks after October 7 indicated 60 percent of the Israeli public overall, including majorities of the mainstream left and right alike, said the IDF should "reoccupy Gaza" to ensure Hamas cannot reconstitute.⁴ The shock, shaken confidence, and uncertainty unleashed throughout Israeli society now have translated into a grim determination and resolve to bear the costs – in lives, treasure, time, and international relations – needed to ensure that Hamas will never threaten Israel again. To be sure, this challenge is rendered all the more difficult by Hamas's cynical holding of Israeli civilian hostages as human shields and bargaining chips to try to compel Israel – directly or indirectly – to terminate its military operations well short of its goals.

Intense, Long-Haul IDF Operations in Gaza

Operation Swords of Iron's unprecedentedly ambitious goal, and Israel's domestic unity behind it, translate to an entirely new set of security needs and end-state in Gaza compared to Israel's past conflicts with Hamas. Concretely, the IDF aims to conduct serious large-scale operations for much longer timeframes – likely throughout 2024 at least – and at higher intensity than those advocated or assumed by certain American leaders and other officials.⁵

From the opening of this campaign, Israel has stated its need to eliminate Hamas's military and governance capacity inside Gaza. That mission has translated to much more demanding and open-ended operations than any previous conflict there, including an intensive combined-arms ground maneuver campaign against Hamas's strongholds in both the northern and southern Strip, potentially extending down through Rafah and Hamas's smuggling lifeline via the border with Egypt. The IDF then would transition to more standoff operations with less persistent presence on the ground in Gaza, aimed at preventing Hamas remnants (or those from PIJ or other major terror groups) from reconstituting and posing serious future threats. Though this phase envisions lower-intensity operations than the full-scale ground maneuver campaign, it still likely would not be "low" in the sense seemingly anticipated by American officials. Indeed, such "follow-on" operations would still have to neutralize Hamas's significant remaining military infrastructure, including rocket factories, weapons depots, and most importantly a tunnel system (paid for by diverted international aid) that stretches up to 400 miles, often at great depth – a true "city underneath a city" with few parallels in recorded history, as one of this study's Israeli interlocutors noted. Equally important, Israel expects it will have to retain this mission set and basic force posture throughout 2024 and possibly beyond, in order to sustain its high benchmark of destroying Hamas's military capabilities. Additionally, along their common border, Israel is determined to maintain a military buffer zone inside Gaza where no Palestinians will be allowed.

From President Biden down, the administration unequivocally supported the necessity of Israel's operation in word and deed, including the first-ever visit by a sitting American president to Israel in wartime. Backed up by a steady stream of public engagements by high-level administration officials to Israel and the region, President Biden and Secretary Blinken declared repeatedly from the start that Israel has both the right and responsibility to achieve its maximal goals against Hamas. Already on October 10, President Biden stated, "if the United States experienced what Israel is experiencing, our response would be swift, decisive, and overwhelming."⁶ This was reflected in his administration's immediate moves to restock the IDF with large quantities of precision-guided munitions, artillery rounds, and other vital materiel – at levels not seen in Israel since the 1973 airlift, and on an even faster timetable, without the bureaucratic delays evident 50 years ago. The Biden team's appreciation of the fundamentally different nature of this Israeli campaign is all the more telling in light of the competing demands on these resources for confronting Russia's war on Ukraine and China's escalating military challenge in the Indo-Pacific, and especially when compared to the belated and seemingly begrudging U.S. resupply efforts during Israel's largest prior Gaza operations in 2014 and 2021.⁷

Early in Operation Swords of Iron, however, gaps already were appearing in terms of U.S. and Israeli expectations for the intensity and duration of the conflict. Secretary Austin said on December 18 in Tel Aviv that "I'm not here to dictate timelines or terms," as the administration initially resisted international pressures for ceasefires that would halt IDF operations far short of their goals.⁸ Yet by early 2024 the administration had shifted to pressing Israel to wind down its campaign and transition to much more "targeted," lower-intensity operations, and it successfully pushed the IDF to withdraw thousands of troops from Gaza – even as heavy combat still raged in the central and southern Strip.⁹ Not long after, U.S. intelligence assessments noted how Hamas swiftly capitalized on the IDF drawdown to begin reconstituting its combat and governance assets in Gaza City.¹⁰

The Biden administration also boosted its diplomatic push for a hostage deal and long-term ceasefire that would create time and space for its stated goals of "revitalizing" the Palestinian Authority (PA) and pursuing its broader postwar ambitions for Gaza and Arab-Israeli relations. Yet as the painful experiences from past conflicts in Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2014 demonstrate all too well, international pressure on Israel to terminate military operations prematurely only raises the odds and costs of the next conflict. Forcing Israel to stop short of its objectives would be prohibitively counterproductive for everyone involved, including the United States.

With the IDF prematurely out of the picture as the only force capable of preventing Hamas, PIJ, and others from quickly regaining their grip over Gaza, tens of thousands of Israelis would not return to their homes the country's south, thus leaving Israel's basic sense of security in doubt. Israeli deterrence, already battered after October 7, would be further eroded by failing to achieve its explicit goals in Gaza, and America's own leadership

and credibility in the region – increasingly suspect in the eyes of friends and foes alike – would be undermined by so conspicuously strong-arming its closest regional partner. Iranian proxies would be further emboldened to attack U.S. and Israeli targets, and Hezbollah would dig in its heels on Israel’s northern border to prevent tens of thousands of Israelis from returning to their homes there as well. The perception of a victorious axis of resistance led by Tehran would greatly complicate efforts by friendly Arab countries to work with the United States on reforming the PA, pursuing Israel-Palestinian peace, strengthening Israel-Arab strategic ties, and trying to rebuild Gaza. By the same token, neither Israelis nor Palestinians would see any light on the two-state political horizon. And ultimately, enabling Hamas to return to its prewar role in Gaza would rob the people there of any hope for a better future – both in the long term and in meeting immediate humanitarian needs, since Hamas and other extremists would resume hijacking and diverting whatever foreign aid still came in for their own military purposes.

Immediate Implications for Gaza

Those humanitarian needs are immense and growing, and the United States and other key international actors urgently must address the war’s calamitous effects on the rudiments of human existence in Gaza. By itself, Israel’s systematic removal of Hamas’s military capabilities and governmental institutions would leave the densely-populated Strip with serious deficits in vital administrative and security functions. This dangerous void is exacerbated by two major factors. First, Hamas’s authoritarian pre-war grip on key ministries, the top layers of which are being toppled, means there may be little left over in terms of functioning governance to readily fill yawning gaps in basic services and aid. Second, Hamas’s illegal and cynical shielding of its military activities behind and beneath civilian sites throughout Gaza – housing blocs, hospitals, schools, and other critical infrastructure – directly compounds the war’s physical destruction and human toll. The IDF’s operations targeting these sites point to the adage that war can be awful and lawful at once.

The aid that continues flowing into Gaza via Egypt, and the IDF’s extensive precautions to mitigate civilian harm, do not come close to offsetting the death, disease, and sheer human misery that comes with conditions like those prevailing across the Strip. Most of its more than two million Palestinian civilians are now internally displaced in Gaza, facing winter crowded into makeshift camps with inadequate supplies and little foreseeable hope of returning quickly to their homes or normal lives. Absent rapid, well-organized efforts at very large-scale efforts to mitigate these dire straits, Gaza’s accelerating humanitarian disaster and security vacuum could portend a descent into anarchy, even greater suffering – a veritable Somalia on the Mediterranean – and the outflow of instability that would inevitably come with it. Moreover, failing to address the unfolding human tragedy in Gaza will further fuel the mounting international pressure on Israel to end its military campaign short of its objectives against the Hamas regime.

Long-Term Implications for Gaza

The postwar framework articulated to date by President Biden and his top aides borders on the politics of the impossible in Israel. It hopes to bring back the PA to administer Gaza and resume working toward a two-state solution, after undergoing vaguely-defined “revitalization.” But this fails to account for Israelis’ near-unanimous belief, strengthened since October 7, in the need for far-reaching deradicalization efforts among Palestinians writ large. It also fails to account for Israelis’ corresponding skepticism about lasting peace with any entity currently claiming to represent the Palestinian people. Long before that attack, the PA’s rampant corruption, ineffectiveness, collapsing legitimacy, and consistent support for incitement and subsidization of terrorism – despite formally recognizing Israel and committing to non-violence – drove home for Israelis and others how a sovereign Palestinian state, run by anything resembling the existing PA, would threaten Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian, Egyptian, and regional security alike.

Events since October 7 magnified for Israelis the untenability of meaningful compromise with an unreconstructed Palestinian political structure. Widespread outpourings of popular support for Hamas’s attack, in both Gaza and the West Bank, underscored the critical need to defeat the “resistance” (*muqawama*) narrative that largely prevails throughout Palestinian politics and society. Moreover, while perhaps little appreciated outside Israel, the fact that Gazan civilians joined in the October 7 massacre, seemingly spontaneously without direction from Hamas or others, throws into sharp relief the depth and dangers of 16 years of Hamas-led radicalization of the Strip’s educational, religious, and media spheres – all of it abetted and empowered by Qatari money, United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) infrastructure, PA policies and textbooks, and general international indifference. Spontaneous West Bank demonstrations that cheered Hamas for the massacre, and Ramallah’s conspicuous failure to condemn the attack and its willingness to compensate families of Hamas terrorists who died in the attack, combined to raise Israeli fears of copycat-style attacks and compound their dark views toward “peace” with the existing PA.

Notably, where Israelis split evenly in polling on a two-state solution shortly before October 7, afterward they shifted markedly against it, with fully two-thirds opposing “an independent, sovereign Palestinian state because this would pose an unacceptable security risk to Israel.” Just as telling, a mere four percent of Israelis said they would trust even a “revitalized” PA to secure Gaza against terrorism, compared to 95 percent favoring the IDF doing so.¹¹

Finding 2: No “Day After” in Gaza Alone

Overview

There is no “Day After” solely in Gaza. Hamas’s attack was the first, but far from the most threatening, eruption of Iran’s “ring of fire” encircling Israel and the region. This also threatens U.S. interests in the region by straining the IDF on multiple fronts, draining Israel’s military and economic resources, and raising the difficulties and risks of failing to defeat Hamas. The United States must address Gaza’s future in the context of this larger need to counter Iran and its proxy armies, push back the bigger threat to Israel and regional peace from Hezbollah, and revive U.S.-led efforts to expand and deepen Israel’s relations with a bloc of pragmatic Sunni Arab states and integrate them into a new Middle East security order.

Iran’s Ring of Fire

October 7 was the most shocking demonstration to date of Tehran’s grand strategic project, which ultimately seeks to destroy Israel, evict the United States from the Middle East, and establish its own hegemony over the Gulf and much of the Arab and Islamic worlds. Regardless of the extent to which Tehran knew in advance the specific timing of Hamas’s attack, from Iran’s perspective it offered the chance to use one of its expendable proxies to shatter the image of Israeli security, isolate the Jewish state, erode U.S. credibility and regional leadership, and derail increasingly close ties among the United States, Israel, and budding Arab partners. It also may have provided Hezbollah with useful lessons for an even larger and more devastating ground attack on Israel from the north. Indeed, the ensuing surge of synchronized hostilities against Israel and/or America from every corner of Tehran’s proxy empire after October 7 is a potent reminder of the scope and severity of threats orchestrated by the Iranian regime, and its enormous capacity to destabilize the region along with international politics and commerce. It also shows how Gaza’s future is inextricably intertwined with countering this larger challenge.

This Iranian playbook centers on the ring of fire it has assiduously assembled everywhere from Lebanon, Gaza, and the West Bank to Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. For years, Iran armed a network of proxy militias in these arenas with sophisticated missiles, drones, and ground forces. Recently, it focused on tightening strategic and operational coordination among them, as seen in their abilities to conduct near-simultaneous regionwide strikes. Combined with Iran’s impressive arsenals of drones and missiles, the largest in the Middle East, these forces target Israel’s vulnerable lack of strategic depth by trying to overwhelm its world-class defenses with ground, air, sea, amphibious, and subterranean strikes on multiple fronts. These same proxies likewise pose

serious problems for U.S. troops around the region and Arab partners.¹² The Houthis' serial attacks on seaborne traffic in Bab el Mandeb, which successfully diverted major shipping companies away from the Suez Canal and Red Sea, also could provoke a wider crisis by impacting major chokepoints for the global economy and food security.¹³ In 2024, the United States has struck Houthi targets week after week in an effort to degrade their capabilities and deter them from further interference in international commerce.

The broader and shared nature of this threat has been on full display since October 7. In addition to its most intensive campaign ever in Gaza, Israel also is engaged in the heaviest fighting along the Lebanon border since its last major conflict there in 2006, with Hezbollah launching unprovoked and persistent cross-border attacks starting October 8, including firing more than 1,700 munitions at Israel. President Biden quickly perceived the larger dynamics and risks involved, swiftly ordering a large U.S. naval buildup off Lebanon's coast, sending significant additional naval power into the Red and Arabian seas, and pointedly warning both Iran and Hezbollah "don't, don't, don't, don't" intervene and expand Gaza into a full-blown regional war.¹⁴ Israel's responses have also been instrumental in limiting Hezbollah's provocations, including tripling its ground forces along the border, keeping the bulk of its air forces and advanced munitions ready for operations in the north, and inflicting more than ten-fold losses on Hezbollah fighters compared to those it has sustained. The Israeli war cabinet's razor-thin decision not to launch a full-scale preemptive attack on Hezbollah in October also may have affected the latter's calculus about intentional escalation.¹⁵

These deterrent efforts have helped keep Lebanon below the threshold of all-out war for now, but Israel is also dealing with Hamas-related violence in the West Bank and Iranian proxy threats in Syria. On a single day in early January, the IDF conducted strikes in Gaza, southern Lebanon, and outside Damascus; the following day, it killed a Hamas leader with an airstrike in Beirut, just a week after the fatal targeting of an IRGC general who had long managed Iranian operations in Syria and Lebanon.¹⁶ Shortly thereafter, it also killed a key Hezbollah commander in Lebanon.¹⁷

And now Israel faces a totally new problem from the far south: long-range missiles and attack drones fired by Iran's well-armed and increasingly aggressive proxies in Yemen, known as the Houthis. Like Hezbollah, this threat is inseparable from the regional picture and America's role in it. With their attacks on Israel blunted by an unprecedented combination of Israeli, American, and Saudi air defenses, the Houthis joined other Iranian proxies in targeting more vulnerable weak points. The net result, despite steadily-broadening U.S. military operations in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, is more than 160 strikes on U.S. bases – including the first lethal attack on U.S. forces in late January, in Jordan – and brazen Houthi attacks threatening freedom of navigation in one of the world's most important shipping lanes at Bab el Mandeb. In response, the United States has assembled a multinational armada to challenge the blockade and has conducted intensive strikes against Houthi military installations in Yemen and against Iran-backed militia in Syria and Iraq.

Hezbollah: The Epicenter of Iran's Terrorist Imperium

Lebanese Hezbollah has long posed the largest military threat to Israel, short of Iran achieving nuclear weapons capability. Even so, this danger at the core of Tehran's network of regional terror armies has taken on new gravity and urgency since October 7. As part of Israel's deeper reexamination of its security concept since the Hamas attack, Hezbollah's actions are also compelling an overdue, and potentially far more consequential, Israeli reckoning with the threat on its northern front.

From the aftermath of the 2006 Lebanon War right up to October 7, Israel focused primarily on Hezbollah's steadily-growing rocket and missile arsenals, which are an order of magnitude larger than anything else in Iran's ring of fire. Recalling its pre-war approach to Hamas, Israel waged a decade-long "Campaign Between the Wars," relying heavily on intelligence and standoff airpower, to interdict Iranian shipments of game-changing weaponry and delay or degrade Hezbollah's steady ascent as the world's best-armed non-state actor. Even before Hamas's attack, however, this cost- and risk-averse campaign did not stop Hezbollah from amassing at least 150,000 total projectiles, including far more powerful, long-range, and precise munitions than anything ever possessed by Hamas or Iran's other Gaza proxies. Hezbollah could fire as many as 6,000 of these projectiles per day on a sustained basis in a full-on conflict, compared to Hamas's one-day peak of 2,500.¹⁸ This credibly threatens to overwhelm Israel's advanced multi-layered air defenses and inflict potentially catastrophic damage on its critical infrastructure, major urban areas, and basic functions of everyday life.

Today Hezbollah's indirect-fire capabilities are as potent as ever. But the horrible clarity in hindsight of the threat from Hamas's al-Nukhba ground forces triggered Israel's sharp reappraisal of the added, even greater, perils posed by Hezbollah in general, and its Radwan special forces in particular. Indeed, on October 7 Hamas's al-Nukhba forces actually executed the playbook developed by Hezbollah. As far back as 2012, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah vowed explicitly to "order our soldiers to conquer the Galilee," in the next war with Israel. Since then, Radwan units that would carry out this order have steadily expanded their capabilities and hard-won combined-arms combat experience – forged in the cauldron battles of Syria's civil war – that render them far more dangerous than even Hamas's shockingly sophisticated and sizable assault on October 7.¹⁹

Geography matters as much as capacity here. In 2018-19, the IDF neutralized multiple Hezbollah tunnels designed, like those under the Gaza border, to carry out massacres and kidnappings on Israeli soil. Yet the hilly and densely-forested terrain along the Blue Line, which demarcates the Israel-Lebanon border, still acts as "aboveground tunnels" to aid Radwan cross-border infiltrations in a way that the Gaza border's relatively open flatlands and gently-sloping dunes largely do not. Meanwhile, many northern Israeli towns and villages are more proximate to the border than even those devastated by al-Nukhba forces in the south.

These threats became clear and present on October 7, as did the past failure of trying to contain the growing problem. In a mirror exodus of Israelis from southern kibbutzim and towns, in the north tens of thousands were ordered to evacuate their homes while thousands more fled of their own volition as Hezbollah launched concerted antitank, sniper, rocket, and drone strikes all along the Blue Line. The uncertain future of these internally displaced Israeli civilians, scattered throughout the country, underscores the extent to which Zionism's foundational promise is under threat no less in the north than the south – and correspondingly how the need to dramatically change the equation with Hezbollah is at least as critical and vital to Israel's national security as its campaign to defeat Hamas. Tellingly, most of Israel's mobilized military reservists deployed to the north, even as the IDF wages the largest ground campaign in its history in the south.

In this light, October 7 prompted an active debate in Israel's security council about whether the northern threat should take priority over a full-scale military campaign in Gaza. That initial debate was resolved in favor of the latter, but it also generated consensus in Israel's security establishment that the real question is when, not if, to address the untenable Hezbollah threat.

The Road to Everywhere Goes Through Tehran

The scale and interconnectedness of these Iran-led threats has momentous implications for Israel, the United States, and the wider Middle East. Certainly, failing to defeat Hamas or, alternatively, seeing the IDF get bogged down in a forever war in Gaza would be viewed as an historic victory for Iran's "axis of resistance," erasing the positive impacts of America's robust wartime support for Israel and harming the pre-October 7 budding U.S.-led regional security architecture premised on deeper Israel-Arab strategic ties. As one senior American official put it in an interview to this study group, "If Israel tries its best and fails, the consequences will be profound for U.S. interests and all the Arab states, dangerously emboldening Iran and Hezbollah with profound regional implications."

Yet even if Israel defeats Hamas militarily and begins rebuilding its shattered deterrence, this will be merely the end of the beginning. There will be no sustainable long-term solution for Gaza or the region while this ring of fire still jeopardizes Israel's *raison d'être*, commits further unchecked aggression, and derails future progress on a new U.S.-Israel-Arab coalition committed to building a more stable, prosperous, and secure Middle East.

The path forward depends ultimately on American leadership and credibility to mobilize its friends and allies to contain and counter this overarching threat. Well before October 7, the Biden administration sought to reassert America's longstanding, but waning, role as the ultimate guarantor of Middle East security, promote stability through enhanced Israel-Arab security and economic cooperation, and check growing Chinese and Russian regional inroads. In building on the Abraham Accords, this vision reflected increasingly shared U.S.-Israeli-Arab interests in dousing the ring of fire, combatting extremism, and

turning the Middle East, Israel included, into a hub for global trade and development. Both before and after Hamas’s attack, the hopes for realizing such a transformational approach to the region – centered around Israel-Saudi normalization – rest on the bedrock of strong U.S. deterrence, security assurances, and material support for Arab countries to withstand Iran-backed pressures against working with Israel and the United States to reduce regional tensions, starting with Gaza’s postwar recovery and reconstruction.

The events of October 7, and especially Tehran’s strategy since then, are intended as a dagger to the heart of this U.S.-led model. Iran clearly wants to convey that the risks of closer ties with the United States and Israel are simply not worth running. To this end, and without provoking real harm to Iran itself, its proxies impose regular costs directly on U.S. forces to punish the Biden administration’s support of Israel. They also challenge U.S. credibility by repeatedly calling the White House’s bluff about responding forcefully, and by successfully threatening the seaborne lifelines of Israel and America’s energy-exporting Arab partners.

Finding 3: Core Realities and Prerequisites

Overview

Based on these hard truths about Israel and the region after October 7, moving toward a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Gaza requires acknowledging several core realities and prerequisites. There is no hope for a better future in Gaza, Israel, or the region unless Hamas is fully defeated and dismantled as a military and political force capable of threatening Israel again or decisively determining Gaza’s future trajectory, including any ability of Hamas to reconstitute. Very likely this will entail larger-scale, longer-term IDF operations than many American and other officials currently realize or factor into their postwar planning for Gaza’s future.

At the same time, neither U.S., Israeli, nor peaceful Arab interests will be served if Israel finds itself “stuck” in Gaza with an unsustainable long-term burden that drains Israel’s military strength and economic vitality. Israel’s deterrent power and self-confidence, the compact between its citizens and the state, and its role as America’s most important security partner for countering the broader Iranian challenge urgently need to be restored. This effort will require concerted U.S. and international action to help Israel manage the postwar situation in Gaza by mitigating the unfolding humanitarian disaster and preventing Gaza’s slide into chaos and violent anarchy. It also means proactive steps toward real, longer-term efforts to deradicalize Palestinian political and public life, both in Gaza and the West Bank, in order to realize Palestinians’ political aspirations for meaningful self-government and to make lasting progress toward peace possible.

Hamas's Rule Must Be Destroyed

After October 7, the visible and overwhelming defeat of Hamas is the incontrovertible precondition for a better future for Gaza. Tens of thousands of Israelis will return to their homes in the south, local Gazans will come forward to build and lead, aid can be delivered and services restored, friendly Arab countries will work toward a more stable region, and Israel and the outside world can realistically envision eventual Palestinian self-rule, only to the extent they are not worried about renewed threats from Hamas and the extremism it represents.

Israel's existential interest in this outcome is reflected explicitly in its objectives for Operation Swords of Iron. Its citizens' ability to live safely anywhere in their own country, and the ethos of the whole Zionist project, will remain in question until Israelis can repopulate the Gaza envelope without fearing for their lives. Indeed, October 7 unified Israelis and utterly delegitimized their previous risk-acceptant and cost-averse approach, which resigned the country to tolerating Hamas's reign in Gaza as the least bad option.

A major factor that could complicate Israel's ability to dismantle Hamas is 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 get 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 Israeli military operations may now pose the greatest threat to the hostages' lives, fearful that they could be killed in an errant IDF strike or by Hamas's leadership as a desperate last act before being captured.

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 ease the suffering of innocent Palestinians, many countries also are 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 citizens being held for more than four months in the most brutal conditions, is of course ultimately one that only 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 does 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 could 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 could be powerfully validated.

Hamas's survival also would destroy Gaza's hopes for a better future. However widespread the antipathy toward Israel in Gaza, if pre-October 7 polls showing only a quarter of the Strip's inhabitants favoring Hamas are correct, it strongly suggests the majority of Gazans do quietly hope to end the aggression, authoritarianism, and misgovernance wrought by Hamas's 16 years in power – and the frequent conflicts, isolation, and economic misery it has produced.²⁰ There is at least a basis to hope that some version of “ Hamas fatigue ” translates into an unspoken desire among many Gazans for this round of conflict to end very differently than each devastating but inconclusive one before it. This hope has no chance of becoming coherent grassroots action, however, and Gazans cannot begin forging a fundamentally different reality for themselves, if there is no shadow of a new future. They will not step forward to put their lives and livelihoods on the line if they fear Hamas will resurface, trigger further rounds of destructive conflict with Israel, and cut them and their families down as traitors.

For similar reasons, a premature or permanent ceasefire would greatly diminish prospects for wider peace efforts. Given Hamas's commitment to perpetual conflict with Israel, the international resources needed for Gaza's relief, recovery, and reconstruction would not be forthcoming. Like local Gazans and the international community, wealthy Arab prospective donors will not invest time, blood, or treasure reviving Gaza if they have good reason to think Hamas still looms around the corner and another round of war is only a matter of time. Nor would there be any opportunity to create more moderate and capable 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, widespread regional perceptions of victory by Hamas and Iran's axis of resistance would greatly complicate U.S. efforts to broker both a two-state solution, as well as further Israeli-Arab normalization and integration. For moderate U.S.-aligned Arab regimes like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, Hamas is the middle of the Venn diagram where their twin nightmares of Iranian and Sunni extremism meet. From their perspective, anything viewed as a Hamas victory will embolden the Iranian axis to ramp up its destabilizing attacks across the entire region. It will also put wind in the sails of their rivals in Turkey, Qatar, and the broader Muslim Brotherhood movement. Though not often said aloud, friendly Arab states also want Hamas defeated so Israel can rebuild its once-formidable deterrence against Tehran and its proxies and regain its enviable prowess as a high-tech powerhouse. Arabs' potential to harness and benefit from these Israeli assets helped drive the Abraham Accords, recent progress toward Israel-Saudi normalization, and the closer economic and strategic ties that could come with it.

All these overlapping interests are in line with those laid out by American officials. The Biden administration has admirably backstopped Israel's objective of destroying Hamas. The best example is President Biden's moral clarity about defeating the evil the group represents – clarity which is all the more admirable given the attendant costs to him and his party at home in an election year. The administration's parallel emphases on mitigating humanitarian suffering and moving toward long-term peace, whatever

the specific political path, likewise require that Hamas be reliably out of the picture. And finally, a new U.S.-led regional architecture can only be brought to fruition if the entire Middle East perceives unequivocally that Israel is not failing or bogged down in Gaza, but is instead again a viable security provider with robust deterrence backed by American commitment and superpower.

For all these reasons, and 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.

Military Demands of Defeating Hamas

Israel's ambitious goal to defeat Hamas's military capabilities and governing authority, and to prevent its reconstitution, is a shared interest of most parties concerned with Gaza's future. It means the IDF will have to retain ultimate security responsibility and freedom of maneuver throughout Gaza for an extended period of time. The notion that any other conceivable force – Palestinian, Arab, or international – will combine the necessary will and capability to bring about the dismantling of Hamas's military power and prevent its reconstitution, is at best unrealistic and at worst fanciful. The IDF, therefore, will almost certainly need to maintain a level of counterterrorism activity in Gaza that is larger, more intense, and longer-lasting than many American officials and certainly those of other governments will find comfortable.

This tough reality already came into sharper focus during the highest-intensity, ground maneuver "Phase 2" of Operation Swords of Iron. While American officials pressed Israel initially to avoid or delay a ground offensive, and subsequently to transition as quickly as possible to a low-intensity standoff posture, Israeli forces came to grips with the shocking magnitude of Hamas's military infrastructure – and the time and effort required to neutralize it – as they moved deeper into the Strip's labyrinthine urban areas.²¹ In particular, the IDF was surprised by the extent and sophistication of Hamas's subterranean structures and its sustained capacity to fire rocket barrages, even weeks into Israel's ground campaign.

The IDF's need to position so many forces along the Lebanese border and other simmering fronts is another factor working against the preferred U.S. timeframe for Gaza operations, as it reduces Israel's available manpower and firepower for the grinding block-by-block, tunnel-by-tunnel fighting in much of Gaza. And unlike the United States, for whom the direct costs of abandoning wars of choice in far-flung theaters have been relatively minimal, Israel can much less afford to terminate a war of necessity prematurely, pull up all its stakes, and risk threats like Hamas reappearing on its doorstep. In a way they never clearly did before October 7, the majority of Israelis registered their willingness to countenance this long-term IDF activity in Gaza.²²

This all adds up to an expansive IDF mission set, intrusive force posture, and open-ended timelines for meeting Israel’s basic security requirements. Israeli officials stated plainly that, at minimum, they expect the lower-intensity “Phase 3” to include fairly intense and frequent clearing operations, regular brigade-sized counterterrorism incursions, and supporting airpower – likely conducted from a standoff posture surrounding the Strip.²³

Whatever its particular force posture inside the Strip, the IDF intends to establish a no-man’s-land at least 500 meters wide running along the Gaza side of the entire border with Israel. Defense in depth on Israel’s side of the boundary fence is incompatible with repopulating the Gaza envelope, since allowing potential threats from Gaza to reach and breach the barrier system would give them the same straight path into Israeli towns and kibbutzim that Hamas found on October 7. Though Israel plans this unoccupied buffer zone or perimeter to be temporary, if long-term, and purely for military purposes, it threatens *de facto* to contravene the Biden administration’s insistence on no Israeli occupation or diminution of Gazan territory.²⁴ Israel also expects these follow-on activities and force dispositions to persist for significantly longer than American officials may expect, extending throughout 2024 or even further, depending on progress in ensuring Hamas, PIJ, or other threats to Israel cannot reconstitute in Gaza.

Filling the Post-Hamas Vacuum

The expected duration and continuing intensity of Israel’s military campaign, albeit likely at lower tempos as Phase 3 unfurls, only heightens the urgency for U.S. and international preparations to provide Gazans with large-scale aid and temporary shelter, reestablish basic services, and impose some initial modicum of law and order. Even amid ongoing IDF operations, concerted – potentially herculean – mobilization already is needed to mitigate the unfolding humanitarian disaster and support shared goals of preventing chaos and the revival of Hamas, PIJ, and possibly worse ISIS-style extremists.

Since 2007, Hamas’s pervasive misrule, corruption, terrorism, and tight grip on Gaza’s security, administrative, and economic sectors precipitated a tightened access and movement regime that helped render the territory heavily dependent on foreign aid and Israeli-supplied basic services to approach even a rudimentary standard of living for its large, and rapidly growing, populace of more than two million. From the outset of the current conflict, neutralizing key Hamas strongholds in northern Gaza meant destroying large swathes of the housing stock and critical infrastructure from which its fighters operated. It also collapsed Gaza’s private sector, as well as the structures of governance which ran almost wholly through Hamas. This problem is going from bad to worse as the war progresses southward, crowding growing masses of internally-displaced civilians into increasingly overwhelmed humanitarian safe zones, tent cities, and ersatz refugee camps near Rafah on the Egypt-Gaza border. One official from the charity Oxfam warned as early as November, “we’re dealing with a completely

new reality in Gaza. It's been a glimpse into the future of what Gaza will be like after the war, and it's absolute chaos. There's no rule of law. There's no police. People are fending for themselves."²⁵

Arresting this slippery slope into anarchy is a crucial immediate step toward defeating Hamas and seeding the ground for something better to take its place. Making the case that Gazans have been liberated, and that Hamas bears responsibility for their misery, will become harder the longer the Strip remains a rubble-strewn wasteland stalked by disease, starvation, and insecurity. Hamas, PIJ, ISIS, and gun-toting vigilantes will increasingly use their own control of such precious resources to fill the vacuum and regain power. It is also true that the worse the humanitarian crisis grows, the more international pressure will build to impose a ceasefire on Israel that allows Hamas to survive and claim victory. Despite convoys of humanitarian aid flowing into Rafah crossing for weeks, these levels increasingly fall behind the curve of growing demands inside Gaza for water, food, medicine, and basic protection.²⁶ Working with Israel, the United States and the international community need to move expeditiously to remedy this deteriorating situation in which the United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organizations (NGO) are simply overwhelmed by the scale of what is needed. This includes their inability to orderly distribute enough aid to civilians in Gaza's security and administrative vacuums, without it falling into Hamas's hands or being commandeered by armed gangs or unruly crowds of desperate individuals.

No Future for Gaza Without Deradicalization

Beyond the exigencies of ensuring basic services and demilitarizing the Strip, a post-war solution entails deradicalizing the systemic extremism embedded in Palestinian public life. This will require the United States and others to seriously rethink their past and future approaches to Gaza and the West Bank, and the company they keep in the process. U.S.-led aspirations for a revitalized PA to assume leadership in Gaza and restart two-state talks is unrealistic, unviable, and incompatible with Israeli needs for a much deeper overhaul of the PA, and of Palestinian institutions and society more broadly, before there can be real progress toward Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation and peace. As a corollary, Qatar's and Turkey's roles as supporters of Islamist extremists, including Hamas, render them ineligible in Israeli and friendly Arab eyes to remain the dominant outside players in Gaza's long-term future.

The international community's existing approach to the Palestinian issue in general, and the PA in particular, echoes Israel's past preference for kicking the Hamas and Hezbollah cans down the road. At the cost of billions of dollars in assistance, and decades of lost time, the United States and others rehearsed well-intentioned rhetoric about a two-state solution and ending PA incitement and subsidization of terrorism, without any of the heavy lifting to actually make it possible. In Gaza, the result is deep-seated radicalization and miseducation under Hamas, funded and propagated by Qatar and

outsourced largely to UNRWA. In the West Bank, the outcome is the pervasive anti-Israel propaganda in PA schools and media, which distracts from its own corruption and inability to offer any real alternative to Hamas – let alone foster the basic institutions and values of a sovereign state existing peacefully alongside Israel. Notably, the PA still has yet to condemn Hamas’s atrocities.

October 7 highlighted these failures, and the impossibility of real coexistence between Israel and the current Palestinian leadership and its enablers. The spontaneous waves of civilians that committed their own atrocities that day against Israelis speaks to the underlying antisemitic poison in Gazan society, which will remain even if Hamas is eliminated. The Hamas threat in the West Bank, steadily building for years, also became much more pressing and problematic as celebrations erupted on October 7 in cities like Ramallah, Jenin, and Nablus.²⁷ It showed the PA’s signal failures to stamp out Hamas or counter the latter’s extremist appeal and narratives, underscoring its own illegitimacy with its own people – and by implication its utter untrustworthiness to assume administration of postwar Gaza and act as a reliable bulwark to Hamas’s reconstitution. The PA willingly reinforced these fears and mistrust by doling out official stipends to families of Hamas and other Gazans that executed the October 7 atrocities. Part of its larger “pay for slay” program that incentivizes such violence, these subsidies now make the organization even less conscionable to Israelis. Polling in the Palestinian territories in November recorded a three-fourths majority supporting Hamas’s brutal attack, further underscoring the profound need for root-and-branch reform across the board.²⁸

Accordingly, Israelis of all political stripes will insist that their security needs, and their ability to entertain concessions and tough tradeoffs to realize legitimate Palestinian political aspirations, depend on comprehensive deradicalization that goes well beyond replacing PA President Mahmoud Abbas and related cosmetic revitalizations. Nor can they continue abiding Doha’s and Ankara’s provision of funds, political support, and safe havens for Hamas. And Israel is far from the only player in Gaza’s postwar future that holds such views. In addition to privately hoping for Hamas’s elimination, many moderate Arab regimes see the PA’s current stagnant leadership and indulgence of Palestinian rejectionism – and its inflammatory effects on the Arab Street – as roadblocks to their own interests in boosting ties with Israel, rolling back Qatar- and Turkish-backed Muslim Brotherhood subversion, and ensuring both domestic and regional stability in order to foster prosperity and realize their ambitious internal development goals.

Finding 4: Options for Postwar Gaza

Overview

These realities and prerequisites should shape the options for the United States and other international actors to begin developing plans, and a process of elimination, for a sustainable postwar Gaza. In light of the hard truths spelled out above, proposals for Israeli, UN, PA, Arab, or American forces to provide security, law and order, and basic administration are unworkable, unwise, or otherwise unrealistic. A more flexible and adaptive U.S.-backed approach would be to mobilize its key partners in a coalition of the willing, focused initially on securely addressing Gaza's most urgent humanitarian and recovery needs. To ensure the safe and effective execution of such emergency activities, the coalition should draw upon capable national forces from outside the Middle East and/or private security contractors (PSC). Concurrent with this work, efforts should be made to identify and work with any existing non-Hamas structures in Gaza, as well as emerging local leaders and the Palestinian diaspora, to begin building a new interim civil authority for the territory.

Not Israel

Israel's freedom of military action throughout the Strip will be focused exclusively on defeating Hamas, PIJ, and other terrorist groups, and ensuring they cannot reconstitute. While creating obvious political discomfort for outside actors seeking to work in Gaza, these dangerous and lethal operations that only Israel is prepared to undertake to keep Hamas at bay will be critical for any effort to safely and fairly conduct disaster relief, restore basic services, re-impose law and order, and commence the processes of rebuilding governance and a functioning economy.

But while retaining this critical high-end security role, there are several important reasons Israel should not be saddled with rehabilitating and administering postwar Gaza. It lacks the bountiful resources and administrative capacity to stave off large-scale humanitarian disaster and encourage embryonic local governance, especially because such efforts already must start scaling up while the IDF is still consumed with its ambitious and demanding military objectives. There is accordingly little appetite inside Israeli society for what are viewed as grand political solutions, possibly involving years of open-ended and costly commitments, for reoccupying Gaza and building a new post-Hamas reality. It also would risk bogging down the IDF in a secondary theater, straining its budding coalition with Arab partners, and eroding its ability to address larger Iran-led problems, starting with Hezbollah's presence on its northern border, that have become much more pressing and unavoidable since October 7.

The outside world has equally little desire for Israel to perform these roles. Local and diasporan Palestinians would deeply mistrust and refuse to be perceived as collaborating with any Israeli administration. Likewise, anything resembling Israeli reoccupation would put friendly Arab governments under great pressure with their own publics. An ongoing Israeli role in governing and policing Gaza likely would make it impossible for these states to participate actively in recovery and reconstruction. And it would be a continuing source of friction in their relations with Israel, and a major obstacle to deepening and broadening regional integration and normalization. Moreover, neither the United States nor these friendly Arab states would benefit from seeing Israel further tied down on the Gaza front, unable to recuperate as the region's high-tech economic engine and leading security provider against shared challenges from Tehran and its proxies. The United States, as a matter of its own national interest, has a significant stake in helping Israel avoid a quagmire that would only further complicate Gaza's recovery, exacerbate Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab tensions, undermine deterrence against Iran-led threats, and endanger renewed progress toward a new U.S.-led security architecture for the Middle East.

Not the United Nations

At first glance, a UN peacekeeping mission or trusteeship might seem to be a sensible alternative. But the political, strategic, and operational considerations and complications would be prohibitive for everyone involved. Any UN-mandated international force is categorically a non-starter for Israel, and by extension should be seen likewise by the United States and all other actors interested in a secure and stable postwar Gaza.

Past UN-brokered reconstruction deals in Gaza failed both to rebuild the Strip and to prevent Hamas's brisk rearmament after repeated rounds of conflict. More recently, 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.²⁹

Likewise in Lebanon, UN peacekeepers have failed to prevent terrorist threats from reconstituting on Israel's immediate borders. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is a poster child for the incapacity and unwillingness of such UN forces, even with robust mandates and ample resources. Hezbollah's remarkable rearmament with Iranian help after the 2006 Lebanon War, occurring in front of UNIFIL troops, directly contravenes UNIFIL's unambiguous mission under UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701 to enforce a demilitarized buffer zone in southern Lebanon and prevent arms supplies to Hezbollah.

Israelis have no faith in UNIFIL, watching as Hezbollah freely violated UNSCR 1701 to expand its arsenals ten-fold since 2006, dig assault tunnels under the Blue Line, and even brush UN units aside to entrench its Radwan forces mere meters from Israel. Any UN-blessed mission in Gaza is thus unconscionable for Israelis across the political spectrum, especially in light of the al-Nukhba forces' horrible success on October 7 and the tens of thousands of Israelis who will not return to their homes in the north while Radwan forces are in literal striking distance. The UN human rights rapporteur voluntarily poisoned the well further when she declared Israel cannot claim the right of self-defense against non-state actors like Hamas, as did UN Secretary-General Guterres's remark that Hamas's October 7 attack "did not occur in a vacuum," suggesting Israelis were somehow culpable for the mass atrocities perpetrated against innocent civilians.³⁰ All these factors were reflected in a late 2023 poll, conducted for this study, showing only 10 percent of Israelis would trust any UN-mandated force to secure Gaza.³¹

Even putting Israel's serious concerns aside, just replicating UNIFIL's strong mandate on paper for a multinational UN force or trusteeship in Gaza would be severely hampered by Russian and/or Chinese vetoes in the UN Security Council. As indicated by their extreme anti-Israel and anti-U.S. bias since the October 7 attack, neither of these adversarial powers has the slightest interest in helping stabilize Gaza and losing an issue that they believe isolates and weakens Washington in the Arab world and internationally, while fomenting political tensions within the United States. Nor would the UN likely authorize even a much more limited policing and public order mission in the context of ongoing and aggressive IDF operations against Hamas.

Should all these political and bureaucratic hurdles somehow be surmounted, UNIFIL shows how there still would be no reason to believe any UN force, either blue-helmeted peacekeepers or non-UN forces operating under a more muscular UN Chapter VII mandate authorizing use of lethal force, would be prepared to carry out the kind of aggressive peacemaking campaign – including intensive counterterrorism operations – needed to keep Hamas from reconstituting.

Furthermore, Gaza today lacks any of the key conditions that enabled the UN's 1990s showcases for success in Cambodia (UNTAC), Timor-Leste (INTERFET), and the Balkans (UNMIK, KFOR). All but the first of these missions had Chapter VII authority, and each relied on capable forces led, staffed, and/or working closely with professional Western militaries. The latter, mostly Australia or NATO members, already were deployed nearby, could transition quickly into their new roles, and had inherent equities and profound security interests in stabilizing problem areas in their immediate backyards. UNTAC and INTERFET faced no real insurgency or other competition for local sympathies, but even then INTERFET still entailed a sizable ten-year Australian force commitment, including two major troop surges and support from American civil-military affairs personnel. Similarly, KFOR required tens of thousands of NATO troops, including from European countries self-interested in preventing direct spillover from Kosovo. And none of these missions had to contend with an external security force, in the case of Gaza the IDF, conducting an ongoing kinetic campaign alongside their zone of operations.³²

Not the Palestinian Authority

U.S.-led hopes for a revitalized PA to provide basic postwar policing and services in Gaza will founder on any number of rocks in Israel, the Palestinian territories, and the region. The Biden administration's use of the term "revitalized" already implies long-overdue, sweeping reforms to professionalize and deradicalize the PA before it can conceivably play a far more constructive role in Palestinian affairs and peace with Israel.³³ And the depth and difficulties of this process will take far longer than Gaza's immediate needs for aid and basic administration can begin to afford to wait.

The current PA is incapable of providing law and order in Gaza's gaping security vacuum, as seen in its repeated failures to counter Hamas as a security and political threat under much more favorable circumstances in the past. This goes back to its initial control of Gaza from 1994-2006, during which Hamas started amassing weapons, through its rout by Hamas in the 2007 Battle of Gaza, and now ever since in the West Bank. Its patent failure, even lack of desire, to forestall lower-level terrorist threats in the West Bank underlines how its postwar Gaza leadership would directly contradict Israeli, U.S., and Arab efforts to ensure Hamas cannot reconstitute. Its pervasive corruption, incompetence, and incitement more generally would accelerate, not mitigate, Gaza's potential spiral into humanitarian disaster, chaos, and further radicalism. These concerns spawn Israeli unease that giving the PA a leading role in Gaza could not only reward it for grossly misgoverning the West Bank, but also convey a dangerous lesson to other bad actors. Post-October 7 polling in Israel for this study returned only five percent in favor of the PA taking over postwar Gaza – the lowest of any option, and only half the number of those favoring the unpopular UN option.³⁴

The PA would face severe legitimacy deficits among Gazans as well, beyond its deeply unappealing capacity shortfalls. Polling indicates its low popularity in the Strip, where many people are fed up with politics as usual from both the PA and Hamas. Gazans are also keenly aware of how the PA has contributed to Gaza's economic and humanitarian troubles by trying to kneecap its Hamas rival financially and undercut its administration of the Strip. Bringing the PA into Gaza amid ongoing IDF operations also would seem to be a non-starter for the PA, since this would replicate its perceived role as Israel's administrative and security subcontractor in the West Bank.

It may be the case that a revamped, reformed, and revitalized PA can eventually play a leadership role in Gaza. But it will take considerable time and effort before that day arrives. Indeed, any security role for such PA forces will take many months, if not years, before they can be properly staffed, trained, and prepared to play an effective security role in Gaza. In the meantime, Gazans' needs require more immediate and pressing Palestinian efforts, ones more easily found already in Gaza rather than in the currently configured Palestinian polity in Ramallah.

Not Friendly Arab States

While appealing in theory, deploying forces from friendly Arab states to police Gaza or take on other security responsibilities would pose unacceptable risks to shared U.S., Israeli, and Arab interests in strengthening the Abraham Accords and extending normalization to other countries, most importantly Saudi Arabia. Especially after October 7, the United States and its partners cannot afford to jeopardize the Accords, and potentially an even bigger breakthrough with the Saudis, which represent the most important strategic accomplishment in the Middle East since at least the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty. They are critical to the region's future stability, and would form the core of a new U.S.-led architecture to counter growing threats from Iran, its proxies, and its increasingly close cooperation with China and Russia – both of whom also harbor designs against U.S. regional interests and influence.

Despite potential benefits from shared language, cultural, and other ties with Palestinians, and despite the appreciable capabilities and manpower of certain Arab forces, there are far larger pitfalls that could reverse historic progress in Israel-Arab relations and create daylight for Iran, Hamas, and other malign actors. Interposing Arab troops between Palestinian civilians and ongoing IDF operations against Hamas would open them to charges at home and from Iranian, Qatari, and other hostile propaganda of doing Israel's bidding by repressing, and even killing, fellow Arabs. Moreover, an Arab force also creates a dangerous potential for accidental collateral damage, confrontations, or even violent clashes between them and Israeli forces that would have disastrous geopolitical consequences – an outcome that Hamas and its Iranian backers no doubt would work hard to bring about. Risk averse and strategically vulnerable Arab states, especially those in the Gulf whose agendas are dominated by ambitious internal development projects, would be rightly reluctant to undertake such dangerous military or policing missions. Neither the United States nor Israel has an interest in pushing them to do so.

Not the United States

A U.S.-led stabilization campaign to secure Gaza would be far more capable than virtually any other force beyond the IDF, but it also would be fraught with prohibitive perils politically, strategically, and operationally. Domestic opposition to U.S. material and diplomatic support for embattled key partners like Israel and Ukraine, already widespread in Congress and the American electorate, would deepen precipitously if American troops were risking their lives, with boots on the ground, in what would immediately be viewed as yet another unwinnable “forever war” in the Middle East. Having pledged as a candidate in 2020 to reduce U.S. involvement in the region, President Biden – and every other White House aspirant and elected official from either party – would see only steep political downside in offering U.S. forces for Gaza, especially as their 2024 campaigns ramp up.

These political hazards would be matched by serious strategic and operational risks. Precious U.S. forces and materiel would have to be diverted from higher-priority global missions to uphold stability, support allies, and deter aggression by great power competitors China and Russia in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Based on U.S. counter-insurgency doctrine developed in Iraq and Afghanistan, a U.S. mission in Gaza could mean an entire corps' worth of armed forces – up to 50,000 troops – with many of them conducting high-risk raids and local security patrols like those that incurred so many casualties in the Iraq “surge” of 2006-07.³⁵

American servicemembers would have to execute such missions in the wreckage of Gaza's unfamiliar urban badlands, where lines between civilians and combatants are easily blurred, and where the U.S. military's conventional superiorities in firepower and tactical proficiency would be negated. Nor could U.S. forces replicate their successful role in the Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO) overseeing the Egypt-Israel peace treaty in Sinai. In stark contrast to Gaza, the parties on the ground there – Egypt and Israel – have mutual interests in both peace and America's participation, the U.S. role is limited to monitoring the status of forces as opposed to combat or active peacekeeping, and its forces can utilize ample existing infrastructure in Sinai.

Either way, U.S. forces would be inviting targets for Hamas and other Iranian proxies, already evidenced by the more than 160 attacks on U.S. forces by Iran-backed militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen since October 7. Tehran and its allies also would do their utmost to foster friction points and outright confrontations between the U.S. military and IDF in Gaza, seeking to undermine the U.S.-Israel strategic partnership and trigger another withdrawal from the Middle East that would shatter American credibility and deterrence, further embolden Tehran, and worsen regional instability.

Building a U.S.-Backed Coalition of the Willing

There is a loose constellation of potential actors, inside Gaza and without, that while still challenging to assemble, does not present the hurdles or baggage of these other options if carefully structured. Assembling and empowering these potential actors will require buy-in and guidance from friendly Arab states to address Gaza's immediate postwar humanitarian needs and, over time, support the emergence of a functional interim administration to replace Hamas-affiliated civil and economic leadership. Given the uncertainty pervading inside Gaza, and the costs of failure, the United States should work expeditiously with its Arab partners to organize a coalition of the willing that can begin quickly addressing Gaza's postwar devastation and help kickstart the process of rebuilding a new political and security dispensation in the Strip – including in the context of ongoing Israeli security operations to prevent Hamas from reconstituting.

Friendly Arab countries with the resources, experience, and self-interest in stabilizing and ultimately deradicalizing Gaza – while not at all desirable in direct security or policing roles – will be essential partners in helping to surge large-scale humanitarian relief, restore basic services, and begin building a new interim civil authority in Gaza. This will include helping to identify, incentivize, and support new and emerging Gazan leaders, security officials, and administrative structures. Arab leadership roles in such a coalition of the willing on behalf of suffering Gazans would help legitimize postwar stabilization efforts for Arab and international audiences. In parallel, it would remove the baggage for Gazans and other parties of being seen to cooperate or rely directly on Israel and the United States, instead enabling them to work first and foremost with fellow Arabs and the international community.

But the price of such deep and unprecedented Arab participation and leadership, especially in the immediate aftermath of the destruction wrought by Israel's major combat operations, will likely require providing these states with real diplomatic defense in the form of a credible two-state political horizon. In interviews for this study, officials from key Arab states as well as others intimately familiar with their position, all maintain that in the aftermath of this devastating conflict, securing their participation will require a strong political position that empowers them to justify to their own populations and the broader Arab and Islamic worlds that their decision to participate in Gaza's postwar recovery is directly in service of larger Palestinian political aspirations, rather than simply Israeli or U.S. interests.

This grouping should ideally include Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE in leadership roles, with U.S., European, and Israeli background assistance. These states could fund, manage, and oversee immediate and interim efforts to deliver humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to Gaza. The United States, Israel, and others could help coordinate these Arab-first efforts with international humanitarian and civil society NGOs that have the proper incentives, expertise, and capacity to organize large-scale relief and reconstruction. Given the inability of forces from friendly Arab states to deploy in Gaza, members of this coalition 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.

The efforts to surge humanitarian relief and ensure it is fairly distributed, repair critical infrastructure and restore basic services, and encourage local Gazans to step forward to cooperate with these efforts and actively begin rebuilding post-Hamas governance will all require a baseline minimum of security. Convoys, aid warehouses and distribution sites, critical infrastructure facilities, and emerging local leaders and cooperative bureaucrats and technicians will need to be protected. Looting, cross-border smuggling, and extortion and intimidation rackets will need to be prevented. Given the political and strategic downsides of Israeli, American, UN, PA, or friendly Arab forces assuming these roles, the best option is third-party military forces drawn from non-regional nation-states that are amenable to Israel and capable of coordinating with its security

forces. PSCs could be considered if such military forces are not forthcoming or need augmentation. These forces could subsequently work alongside local Gazan security providers as quickly and feasibly as proves possible.

Local Gazan and other Palestinian partners will be essential for the activities of any such coalition. The first place to look should be indigenous and diasporan Gazans with the most knowledge, legitimacy, and inherent self-interest in serving as responsible local stewards. Gaza's educated, skilled, and thickly-networked populace, living locally and abroad, offers a reservoir of municipal, regional, clan, and tribal leaders, businesspeople, union leaders, technocrats, and other professionals who are not Hamas diehards. These potential new leaders could include influential and respected elements of the populace who largely went along to get along under Hamas, but who might now feel increasingly vindicated and empowered to turn their underlying frustrations with the corruption, ineptitude, and repression of the old regime into something entirely new.

Indeed, the more efficaciously Hamas is destroyed as a military and governing power, the more readily such forces, with appropriate incentives and protection, will step forward and assume risks and responsibilities of working with a powerful international coalition in stabilizing Gaza. With proper vetting, proactive outside assistance, and stripped of their top-level Hamas minders and enforcers, these cohorts could build on the fairly functional structures of the Strip's existing municipalities and government agencies to restore urgently-needed civil authority, health administration, and basic services, including equably distributing humanitarian aid deliveries, initiating economic reconstruction, mediating local disputes, organizing neighborhood watches, and the like.

In tandem, it must be determined if Gaza's existing body of mid-level technocrats, civil servants, and former security officials – most of whom previously served or otherwise retained official roles in Hamas-run ministries – are still competent, capable, and willing to contribute to postwar security and stability. This relic of the PA's civil bureaucracy in Gaza, the so-called Civil Committees, which Hamas left largely untouched after its takeover of the top echelons of the Strip's ministries in 2007, consists of thousands of current civil servants, as well as former security officials, still on PA payrolls, plus tens of thousands additional aging pensioners. Assuming they are prepared to contribute to a peaceful future, these Fatah and other relatively moderate non-Hamas bureaucrats could be vetted for their experience, legitimacy, and fitness to help form the backbone of an interim Gazan administration.

III. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: International Trust for Gaza

Standing Up an International Trust for Gaza Relief and Reconstruction

Events in Gaza will remain uncertain and fluid amid the continued unfolding of Israeli military operations and a looming humanitarian disaster. Ensuring vital aid deliveries and restoring basic services will be imperative in the short term, alongside efforts to encourage and shape the emergence of a new post-Hamas civil administration, including policing.

In light of the risks and impracticalities of many of the alternatives, the challenges of Gaza can best be addressed by creation, funding, and operation of a multibillion-dollar International Trust for Gaza Relief and Reconstruction. Leading Arab states or a broader multinational coalition, with U.S. support, could drive this effort dedicated to building a peaceful and prosperous post-Hamas Gaza.

The Trust would support all aspects of Gaza's recovery. This includes providing humanitarian assistance, restoring basic services, and helping rebuild civil society. Its work could begin as Israel's highest-intensity military operations wind down, and expand over subsequent months on a rolling basis. This would begin in areas like parts of northern Gaza where operations to dismantle Hamas are most advanced, and then move southward as similar progress is made there.

The Trust's work could also include a follow-on phase to the immediate phase of emergency relief, which would focus more on helping establish permanent post-Hamas security and administrative structures, as well as large-scale economic reconstruction projects. The Trust's civil society efforts would include technical and administrative assistance on matters of governance and deradicalization.

The Trust should be created and supported by a handful of states that accept Israel's role in the region and have the capacity, influence, and desire to help the people of Gaza, to advance a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to foil Iran's strategy to disrupt the region's progress. These members would be drawn primarily from friendly Arab states – and potentially allies from Europe, Canada, and Australia – with strong shared interests and capacity to counter instability and Iran-led extremism. Arab participation would be especially important not just for the substantive contributions they could make to the Trust's funding and operations, but for the legitimacy

they would lend to such a coalition in the eyes of Palestinians, the Arab and Muslim worlds, and internationally. The Trust would be established as an independent and discrete legal entity that, while functioning with the backing and oversight of its national sponsors, would have a distinct and separate identity and would behave more as a super-NGO than a coalition of national sovereigns. This mechanism would offer key states, particularly in the Arab world, a less politically-charged means of immediately aiding Gazans without putting their own prestige, diplomats, or forces in the middle of a still-fraught geopolitical situation where Israel will still be conducting targeted raids for months to come.

American officials should promptly pursue the Trust idea in confidential discussions with their closest regional partners, including Israel, followed by discreet talks to determine the best terms and course by which to create, fund, and implement the Trust's important mission.

The Trust should coordinate with other states' efforts and with those of NGOs and international organizations including the UN. While the Trust operates separately from the UN, it should study and learn from past UN-brokered reconstruction efforts for Gaza that failed either to prevent Hamas from rearming or provide effective incentives and oversight for international funds – a great deal of which seem clearly to have been diverted to building Hamas's military infrastructure, particularly underground. Moreover, as previously discussed, other UN missions like UNIFIL in Lebanon have proven entirely incapable of fulfilling their clear mandates and meeting even Israel's most basic security needs.

As a matter of reality, at least in the Trust's early stages and perhaps for longer, UNRWA will also be delivering aid to Gaza – albeit separately from the Trust. At one and the same time UNRWA has both the greatest immediate capacity to distribute aid and services to Gazans in need, but also a shameful legacy of perpetuating Gaza's refugee problem and its narrative of grievance and incitement against Israel. It is very clear that the agency's staff was deeply infiltrated by and sympathetic to Hamas, and that its schools were centers for the promulgation of hatred and antisemitism. Even as the Trust recognizes the near-term imperative of UNRWA continuing to address Gaza's immediate devastation and human suffering, it should seek wherever feasible to execute its aid efforts separate from and without depending on UNRWA. The Trust also should help formulate and implement a longer-term strategy to replace UNRWA, both by developing new Palestinian assistance institutions and by encouraging other international organizations not burdened by UNRWA's deeply problematic history. For similar reasons, it should advance parallel plans to phase out any roles in Gaza for Qatar and Turkey, the two largest donors to prior failed reconstruction drives.

Israel should seek to cooperate to the maximum extent possible with the Trust, given Israel's interests in averting humanitarian disaster and chaos in the Strip, and in not being left responsible for the huge costs and challenges of doing so. Israel's cooperation

should include maximum efforts to assist the delivery of Trust supplies, equipment, and personnel into Gaza, as well as de-conflicting any ongoing military activities with Trust operations.

The PA should be consulted regarding the Trust's creation and strongly encouraged by its leading members – especially its most influential Arab participants – to approve and support the Trust's work to relieve Gazans' suffering, and as a necessary step to reviving the prospects of a two-state political horizon and the reunification of the West Bank and Gaza under a single Palestinian government. However, during the initial periods of Trust operations, the PA, with the strong support of its Arab partners, should be undergoing improvements in its own governance and practices.

At least in the opening phases of its work, it would be unwise for the Trust's leadership to include either Israel or the PA. This incorporates lessons from Gaza's previous, failed UN-led reconstruction mechanism between Israel and the PA, the PA's own need for internal revamping while Gaza's recovery gets underway, and the political impracticalities of Gazans and other Arabs working overtly with Israel in a period of ongoing Israeli military operations and presence in the Strip.

Governance of the Trust

The Trust's operations would be governed by an International Board of 3-7 representatives from among states founding or supporting the effort. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are logical candidates for this Board, as would be the United States and Egypt, in roles to be negotiated among them. The Trust Board would have ultimate decision-making power, provide oversight, and control funds for the Trust.

The Trust should put a high priority on developing a forum for receiving sustained advice and input from properly vetted, non-Hamas Gazans on how best to advance the Trust's mission and goals. Ideally a standing body, the Council for Administration and Reconstruction could consist primarily of qualified Gazans, both men and women, from Gaza itself, the West Bank, and the diaspora. This Council could be made up of businesspeople, professionals, technocrats, civil society leaders, trade unions, representatives of influential clans and large families (*hamulas*), former officials, and others committed to Gaza's future peace and prosperity. The Council would serve as the Trust's main advisory body and local partner, helping it identify, prioritize, and execute programs to have the greatest impact and operational effectiveness.

As needed, the Trust Board could create subcommittees that help develop and plan programs and policies for recommendation to the Board in sectors critical to Gaza's postwar recovery and the Trust's mission, including but not limited to: humanitarian aid delivery; clearing rubble; repairing critical infrastructure and restoring basic services; housing, healthcare, and education; caring for the war's injured and orphaned;

economic reconstruction; and deradicalization. Such subcommittees also could help oversee the effective implementation of Board decisions and could be bestowed by the Board with power to act.

Getting to Work Building a Better Future

The initial focus of the Trust would be on addressing Gazans' immediate humanitarian needs in as secure and effective a manner as possible, from food and water to temporary housing and healthcare. A rapid effort will also be required to help repair critical infrastructure and restore essential services. For part of this effort, the Trust should look to work with what remains of Gaza's existing administrative agencies and their bureaucratic cadre, the so-called Civil Committee created under the PA in the 1990s and largely comprised of Fatah technocrats still on the PA's payroll – but only after these agencies are shorn of their Hamas leadership and ideological commissars. Of the several thousand former Fatah security officials in Gaza who were forcibly removed by Hamas in 2007, a smaller subset may still be fit for service and could be called back to help provide support for local policing and law and order functions.

Concurrent with these efforts, the Trust should also work to recruit, train, and support a new generation of post-Hamas police, technocrats, and leaders capable of establishing more lasting and non-corrupt interim structures of local governance and security. Finally, the Trust should also be developing, funding, and helping to implement long-term programs for Gaza's economic reconstruction and the deradicalization of its population.

A. Humanitarian Relief

Helping to meet the urgent needs of two million civilians in Gaza whose lives have been devastated by war should be the Trust's top agenda item. Doing so will be critical for humanitarian reasons, but also to try to avert the despair, death, and chaos that a reconstituted Hamas, PIJ, or other violent jihadist groups could exploit. Such efforts should already begin in areas like northern Gaza, where Israel's campaign to dismantle Hamas is most advanced, and where the Trust could focus its efforts to build multiple "humanitarian islands of stability," each one hosting tens of thousands of people by using rapidly deployable prefabricated housing, schools, mosques, and electric and water infrastructure.

The Trust should work in tandem with partner states, international entities, and NGOs with demonstrated capacity to mobilize large-scale multinational humanitarian and disaster relief efforts. This could draw upon logistical and security support from friendly militaries, in particular the appreciable capacity and scale offered by Egypt's security apparatus.

Given the magnitude of Gaza’s humanitarian challenge, the Trust should seek to use all possible entry points for aid in both Egypt and Israel. Certainly, if initial pilot efforts to start building humanitarian islands do begin in northern Gaza, the Trust should seek approval to use Israel’s northern checkpoint with the Strip, the Erez crossing, and to deliver aid there over land by trucks driving from Jordan through Israel and/or via sea using Israeli ports like Ashdod. The Trust should also seriously explore other longer-term options for expanding the scope of Gaza’s import/export capacity via the sea. Floating ports off the Gaza coast could be one option, but eventually large-scale infrastructure investment might be needed to build a major on-land port in Gaza, which could become a valuable link in a new international trade corridor running by sea and land from India through the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan to Israel, Gaza, and the Mediterranean.

B. Security

As Gaza will remain a dangerous environment for some time to come, the Trust’s immediate mission cannot be performed without adequate security for its aid and personnel, and for Gazans with whom the Trust will work. This requires: guarding shipments from initial entry points into Gaza through equitable delivery; protecting the repair, restoration, and ongoing operations of critical infrastructure and basic services, and helping create a reasonably safe environment in which aid can be successfully employed, post-Hamas local leadership can start to coalesce, and economic and social recovery can begin.

To these ends, the Board should seek assistance from and coordination with military forces of responsible states from outside the region that are on good terms with Israel and prepared to coordinate with ongoing Israeli military and security operations against Hamas. As soon as possible, the Trust should also seek to encourage and work with local Gazan security elements, both to assist in implementing the Trust’s immediate tasks on humanitarian aid and restoring services, and more broadly for developing non-Hamas police forces that can, over time, assume primary responsibility for local law and order in association with a new interim administration for Gaza. Close behind-the-scenes cooperation with Israeli and Egyptian services that have the best information and understanding of Gaza’s “human terrain” will be critical in helping vet appropriate local candidates for security roles.

There may be early opportunities for effective cooperation with security forces that arise organically around regional leaders, clans, families, and municipalities. A serious effort should be made to vet thousands of former PA security officials that lost their positions after Hamas’s 2007 coup, but who remain on the PA’s payroll. A parallel effort should be undertaken to map the 7,000 members of Hamas’s police force, to determine whether any of its personnel might in fact not be Hamas diehards, but instead individuals who worked largely to earn a paycheck and would be prepared to work reliably under a new non-Hamas dispensation in Gaza.

Finally, as a high priority, the Trust should encourage and support rapid efforts to recruit a new generation of Gazan police to be professionally trained under programs managed by the U.S.-led security coordination mission for Israel and the PA (U.S. Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority, or USSC), either at the existing Jordan International Police Training Center (JIPTC) or in another Arab state that is a member of the Trust Board. Even rapid training programs will take many months, heightening the urgency of initiating such recruiting efforts as quickly as possible.

To the extent that contributions of national forces from friendly states, and of newly-created or -revived Gazan security forces, are not available in sufficient numbers or expertise, the Trust could hire, train, and equip high-quality PSCs to augment the protection of the Trust's humanitarian missions. Such quality security contractors have performed reliably and responsibly over the past decade in working with Western militaries for a set of well-defined interim security missions. Such a force would be directed by the Board, accountable to it, and, as directed by it, work in close coordination with Israeli security forces.

In employing PSCs, the Trust should be diligent in utilizing the best practices Western militaries have developed to ensure that such forces are employed responsibly and successfully. In prior decades, tragedies have resulted from poor management of PSCs, including most notably the tragic incident in Iraq in 2007 involving the PSC Blackwater. Since then, for example, the U.S. military has developed a rigorous four-step process to impose strict requirements on PSC missions and behavior. Once these measures were employed and diligently enforced, PSCs performed well and without causing unnecessary harm to innocent civilians. These measures include: strict licensing requirements, including the vetting of personnel to ensure high-quality officers and troops; central selection and approval of particular PSC missions; restrictive rules of engagement, tailored as necessary for particular missions; close monitoring of PSC missions, to include such measures as drones and embedded observers, and forceful requirements of accurate after-action reporting; and penalizing any PSC infractions harshly, including imposition of fines, dismissal of personnel, and even withdrawal of PSC licenses and forfeiture of investments.

By combining all these measures – volunteer national forces, training and employing carefully vetted local forces, and, as needed, PSCs – the Trust can conduct its crucial humanitarian and recovery missions with reasonable safety and reliability. While this task may prove quite demanding, the alternative would be to curtail the Trust's missions, increasing Gazan suffering and potentially empowering terrorist forces that will only bring greater misery and disasters to Gaza and beyond.

The security environment in which the Trust operates will be affected not only by Israeli and Palestinian attitudes, but also by neighboring states, particularly Egypt. The Trust leadership and that of the states supporting the Trust's work, including particularly the Arab states and the United States, should use their influence to secure meaningful

and consistent Egyptian efforts to lessen threats to the Trust and prevent the reconstitution of Hamas or other terrorist forces. Permanently dismantling Hamas's military capabilities cannot succeed without a dramatically improved effort to staunch the smuggling of weapons and other military-related goods and equipment across Gaza's border with Egypt. Despite major campaigns by the Egyptian military to destroy smuggling tunnels over the last decade, Hamas succeeded in circumventing these efforts, including by digging even deeper cross-border tunnels. Accordingly, the Trust should put major effort into cooperating with Israel, Egypt, and other helpful Arab partners to develop a new security regime on the Egypt-Gaza border. This new regime should utilize the most advanced technological solutions and enhanced inspection protocols, perhaps under contract to trusted third-country private firms with extensive expertise and experience managing customs and border security.

C. Restoring Gazans' Roles in Good Governance and Essential Services

The Board should work closely with its advisory Council for Administration and Reconstruction as well as regional partners, including as applicable Israel, Egypt, and the PA, on issues of post-Hamas administrative and governance structures. First, with appropriate vetting and evaluation, those parts of the existing pool of technocrats in Gazan ministries that can be reliably separated from their former Hamas leadership should be maintained and put back to work where possible. Many thousands of former PA bureaucrats who formed the Civil Committee continue to have their salaries paid by Ramallah, even as they were retained after Hamas's 2007 coup to operate Gaza's essential services like the water and electric authorities (in close coordination with Israel). The apparatus of the Civil Committee, freed from its Hamas leaders and with the PA's approval, will likely be willing to cooperate in building Gaza's post-Hamas civil administration.

A second line of effort for the Trust – along with its Palestinian advisory Council and other partners, including the PA – should be to encourage, incentivize, and support the appointment of a new technocratic leadership, made up of qualified Gazans, that could form an interim government to manage the Civil Committee apparatus. High-performing members of the advisory Council would be obvious candidates, but efforts should be made to identify such leaders from a broad cross-section of Gazan society. This should include non-Hamas businesspeople, professionals, technocrats, civil servants, representatives from influential clans and large families, municipal officials, leaders of civil society and trade unions, and the Palestinian diaspora. As new leaders come forward in the wake of the dismantlement of Hamas's main military capabilities across Gaza, but while remnants of Hamas, PIJ, and other extremist elements may still survive, the Trust should be supportive of efforts to provide this emerging leadership class with adequate protection.

D. Economic Reconstruction

In the most immediate timeframe, Gazans will need concrete means to support their families, rebuild, and envision a productive future that goes well beyond simply receiving humanitarian assistance. The Trust should work with local Gazan businesspeople, the Gazan and broader Palestinian diaspora, as well as the international community and institutions like the World Bank to develop and fund short-term programs that stimulate the renewal of immediate economic activity, as well as medium and longer-term projects and investments for large-scale reconstruction of Gazan society.

E. Deradicalization

Recognizing that years of radicalization by Hamas has greatly complicated the task of building a post-Hamas Gaza, the Trust should focus on helping to develop, fund, and execute a long-term program for deradicalizing Gaza's media, schools, and mosques. Gazans and the Gazan diaspora should play an active role in developing and implementing these plans, alongside the Trust's Arab members with the most hands-on experience with successful deradicalization efforts in their own societies. The Trust also should engage NGOs with expertise in this area. This program should include strategies for turning schools, religious institutions, and the media into sustained platforms for messages of tolerance, non-violence, and the Palestinian people's interest in peace, including with the state of Israel. This line of effort also must focus on limiting the influence of foreign-owned media and misinformation that consistently distort reporting and foment incitement as a tool of foreign governments.

Deradicalization of the West Bank and the related revamping of the PA would not be missions of the Trust, per se. Yet the efforts in Gaza should aim to serve as a model to encourage similar programs in the West Bank that will be essential if a credible two-state political horizon – one that reunites Gaza and the West Bank under a single authority – is going to be envisioned. Ideally, the key Arab members of the Trust with a deep interest in seeing the Palestinian issue put on a path toward resolution should take the lead in such efforts. As revealed on October 7, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict's continuation provides Iran and its terrorist proxies with an all-too-easy source of opportunity to ignite violence, tensions, and passions across the Middle East, and to disrupt the efforts of states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE to advance a regional environment where investment, modernization, and national progress can flourish.

Under strong and visionary leaders committed to dramatic societal reforms as an essential component of national development, the UAE first and Saudi Arabia in the past five years, have both implemented extraordinary programs in this regard. They have aimed at extirpating hate and the glorification of violent jihad from their key public institutions, including the rooting out of extremist teachers and clerics. School textbooks, sermons by state-backed imams, and major national media outlets now systematically promote messages of tolerance.³⁶

In conjunction with neighboring Jordan, which retains strong influence, connections, and interest in the West Bank, the UAE and/or Saudi Arabia should be encouraged to press the PA to develop and execute a similar set of deradicalization efforts. This should be based on the understanding that such efforts, in which a dominant culture based on historical grievance and hate is replaced with one focused on reconciliation and peace, are essential prerequisites if the PA's priority of moving toward a future Palestinian state is ever to be achieved. After October 7, convincing the Israeli public to agree to a peace process with the current Palestinian leadership and population – one they have good evidence wants to see Israel destroyed – is simply no longer workable, if it ever was.

While societal-wide deradicalization efforts will take years, they will need to be embedded in a larger process of overhauling or revamping the PA to make it not only a viable peace partner for Israel, but a competent governing authority for a future Palestinian state. This includes ending the “Pay for Slay” program that provides PA financial benefits to the families of those killed or imprisoned as a result of terrorist attacks. It will require sidelining or marginalizing the current crop of corrupt, incompetent, and illegitimate PA leaders, starting with President Mahmoud Abbas, putting in place a new technocratic elite committed to building effective institutions and clean government, and developing a state committed to peace with Israel and prosperity and progress for the Palestinian people.

Recommendation 2: Political Horizon

Overview

Marshalling the necessary international support for addressing Gaza's immediate and long-term future will require the United States to square a circle between Israel, the Palestinians, and friendly Arab states that has become even more complicated and consequential after October 7. Israelis are in no position or mood to take risks for peace with an unreconstructed PA that lacks the capacity and the domestic legitimacy to take on core existential decisions about the Palestinians' fate. First, they must rebuild transparent and accountable institutions that are necessary steppingstones toward regaining the trust of Palestinians and the international community alike. In the meantime, friendly Arab states are highly unlikely to take their own risks for Gaza's reconstruction without what they call “a viable path” to a two-state solution. Declaring this as the desired goal, the future end-state toward which everyone is working, has the best chance of providing the necessary diplomatic basis that allows Arab partners to join in the hard work of rebuilding Gaza, reforming the PA, and deepening their relations with Israel in the face of Iranian opposition and skeptical domestic audiences.

At the same time, such a formula must implicitly recognize the cold reality that neither Israel nor the Palestinians will be ready for successful two-state negotiations in the near term. Efforts to push the process beyond broad rhetorical commitments to a two-state framework run near-certain risk of failure, dashed expectations, increased Israeli-Arab animosity and tensions, and the exacerbation of regional instability that can only inure to the benefit of the Iranian axis. Both the Palestinian as well as Israeli polities need to address fundamental and pressing domestic issues before they can even begin to turn toward the arduous task of seeking a negotiated end to their century-long conflict.

Diplomatic Momentum for a Better Future in Gaza

To affirm this political horizon, to “renew our resolve to pursue this two-state solution” as President Biden said in November, is crucial for friendly Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, to buy into a common project like the Trust to lift the burden and responsibility of Gazan recovery from falling entirely on America’s and Israel’s shoulders.³⁷ These and other U.S.-aligned Arab countries have strong self-interests in leading, and unmatched capacities for funding, this massive project to rebuild Gaza, prevent Hamas’s reconstitution, and help curtail Iranian influence. But they will not – as one former high-level official very familiar with Saudi and Emirati thinking colorfully stated in an interview for this study – “stick their hands in the mangle” of Gaza and proffer Marshall Plan-sized financial assistance, without being able to show their own people, Gazans, and the larger Arab and Muslim worlds that they are also meaningfully advancing long-sought Palestinian aspirations for sovereignty. By the same token, they will only take these considerable risks if they can point to U.S. and Israeli pledges that help them credibly undermine Tehran’s cynical, competing claim to defend Palestinian rights through the endless violence of Hamas, PIJ, and the rest of its axis of resistance.

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 point to light at the end of the tunnel and plausibly claim they are working toward realizing their own national aspirations, rather than working to address Israel’s security needs. Polling in the Palestinian territories on October 6 showed a majority of Gazans supporting a two-state solution, well above figures recorded in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.³⁸ Absent a clear political trajectory, and in a context with ongoing Israeli military raids against Hamas and PIJ remnants, Gazans understandably will hesitate to risk being painted as Israeli quislings and collaborators – especially given the certainty of Hamas’s efforts, backed by Iran, to derail any progress using all means available, including intimidation and assassination. Finally, being able to point to an ultimate two-state endgame also insulates Gazans from broader charges that their reconstruction will actually be used as a trojan horse to perpetuate Palestinian division and forestall Gaza’s eventual reunification with the West Bank.

Putting the Horse Before the Cart

If articulating a credible commitment to a two-state solution is a necessary condition for mobilizing multinational support for Gaza's postwar recovery, realism by all parties about the prospects of what is required to achieve that horizon will also be critical. The current PA's inability and unwillingness to build a state that would be remotely acceptable to Israelis or Palestinians – or to make any of the tough compromises to get there – already is reflected in the general concurrence among the United States, Israel, and friendly Arab states that some form of revitalization, revamping, reform, or outright transformation must precede a seat at the negotiating table or new political responsibilities for Ramallah.

By whatever name, this will be an arduous and lengthy process, entailing transformational bottom-up deradicalization and capacity-building reforms as well as top-down leadership changes in the PA, which should precede a revived peace process. This years-long project is well overdue and is a necessary condition for a secure and stable two-state solution. Echoing the similar failure of past U.S. and Israeli containment policies on other fronts, not taking the necessary overhaul of Palestinian politics seriously, and instead rushing ahead with glossy and cosmetic quick fixes, high-level diplomatic gambits, elections, and reunification of the West Bank and Gaza will almost certainly backfire across the board. 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 everyone who wants to build a better future for Gaza, and to the benefit of Hamas and Iran. Pretending that this can be accomplished easily or quickly, and that it will presage early movement to negotiating and creating a Palestinian state in the near term, will be counterproductive and raise dangerous, unrealizable expectations.

Restoring a realistic path to a two-state solution can be a critical part of the better Gazan and regional future, and a long-term political horizon for two states should be recognized by all parties at the outset. In order to move forward to 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 participate in Palestinian politics – and simultaneously the fundamental revamping of the Palestinian Authority into a competent and effective government that can lead, represent, and govern the Palestinian people. Timetables for progress will be illusory and damaging if based on artificial deadlines rather than concrete achievements.

Recommendation 3: Regional Strategy

Overview

Ultimately, a better future for Israel and the Palestinians is inseparable from dealing with Iran's overarching threat to the entire region. Drawing from the wider failures of trying to contain threats from Iran and its proxies before October 7, the United States needs to develop a new, much more comprehensive Middle East strategy. Based on strengthening shared U.S.-Israel-Arab interests and cooperation in resisting Iran-led hegemony, this framework should view Gaza as an immediate, but far from the biggest, challenge.

Comprehensive U.S. Strategy Post-October 7 Middle East

Like Israel's overdue reckoning with the catastrophic costs of muddling through as threats around it became untenable, the United States needs a coherent Middle East strategy to resist and deter Iran's subversion, hegemony, and growing ties with China and Russia in the aftermath of October 7. Only American leadership can articulate and organize a comprehensive regional approach that catalyzes the necessary coalition and coordinates overlapping U.S., Israeli, and Arab interests to resolve Gaza as part of the larger Iran-led problem set. Indeed, Tehran's adroit use of proxies is designed to distance itself as much as possible from the direct costs of its regional ambitions. Iran would love nothing more than for its rivals to focus their attention and resources myopically on Hamas, while it intensifies its nuclear and regional aggression comfortably in the background.

At its core, this new strategy must draw from and build upon two important, yet incomplete, U.S. initiatives impacting the entire Middle East. These initiatives show that there is no substitute for assertive American leadership and engagement, and that such an approach is much less costly and risky – both for Washington and its partners – than counterproductively trying to skirt tough decisions, reduce commitments, and ultimately pivot away from the region.

The first is the Biden administration's effort to deepen and expand Israel-Arab ties under U.S. auspices. Working from the solid base provided by the historic Abraham Accords, this includes security cooperation and integration under U.S. Central Command, ambitious projects like the Negev Forum and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, and pursuit of Israel-Saudi normalization. Initial but impressive progress on this front has largely stalled since October 7, but its underlying logic and appeal are undiminished. The United States, Israel, and friendly Arab states are all self-interested in a bold new Middle East architecture that reaffirms and reinforces America's commitment to its most critical partners, enabling them to assume greater risks and burdens in working cooperatively to counter Iran and advance far-sighted

reform efforts and joint development projects. The actions of China and Russia since October 7 have accentuated America's irreplaceable diplomatic and military power in the region through their not-too-veiled justifications of Hamas, intensified cooperation with Iran, and complete absence of leadership.³⁹

The second key initiative is President Biden's decision to employ American power in the region. Shortly after October 7, he positioned two U.S. Navy carrier strike groups off the coast of Lebanon and in the Arabian Sea and warned Hezbollah and Iran against full-scale intervention in the Gaza conflict. This certainly heartened Israelis in their darkest hour and prevented an even bigger disaster. It no doubt also impressed America's Arab partners, reminding them of the unparalleled power that only Washington can bring to bear to help its closest regional friends in their moment of greatest peril. When the Houthis attacked international shipping and Iranian proxies attacked U.S. forces, the United States responded with retaliatory attacks in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

By helping dissuade Hezbollah from greater escalation and confounding Hamas's hope that its attack would ignite a wider war, these actions were useful reminders that U.S. deterrence actually does work against Iran. However, the shock effect of these actions says just as much, by underlining the prior confidence of Tehran and its proxies that American firepower would never be used against them.

Since then, there have been more than 160 attacks on U.S. forces and vital shipping lanes, resulting finally in the tragic deaths of three U.S. soldiers in late January from a drone strike in Jordan by an Iraqi militia. A handful of tepid U.S. responses leading up to that lethal strike appeared only to provoke Iran and its proxies to escalate further. When at last President Biden ordered a substantially larger retaliation on Iran-backed targets in Iraq and Syria, including a targeted assassination of a militia commander in downtown Baghdad, Iran did move expeditiously to order its Iraqi and Syrian proxies to stand down, at least temporarily – apparently fearful that the U.S. might soon extend its target list to Iranian personnel, assets, or even territory.⁴⁰

The incident vividly underscored not only the direct control that Iran can exercise over its proxies, but also why stronger and sustained U.S. leadership and deterrence against Iran are inseparable predicates of a successful path forward – one that treats both the causes and solutions for the Gaza problem as intimately interlinked with the rest of the region. Senator Chris Coons, a fellow Delawarean with service in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, noted the president's instinctive understanding of this larger dynamic at play, saying in December that “he has embraced Israel in this moment of intense pressure, following a terrorist attack, because he sees this moment in a regional context and is trying to achieve peace in a regional way.”⁴¹

Ensure a Strong and Resilient Israeli Ally

In this strategic context, a primary consideration is helping Israel rebound from the shock of October 7 as a self-confident and resilient ally, a valuable partner to friendly Arab states, and a security provider defending shared interests against Iran, its terrorist proxy armies, and other regional threats. Among friend and foe alike, perceptions of U.S. deterrence and leadership are directly proportional to the strength of the U.S.-Israeli strategic partnership and America's unequivocal support for its closest and most capable regional friend. Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar's belief before October 7 that Israel's domestic polarization had left it internally fraying and externally isolated – one echoed by Supreme Leader Khamenei and Hassan Nasrallah – conveys the horrible risks attending perceptions of Israeli weakness and daylight between it and the United States.⁴²

The United States can only address the set of festering Iran-led challenges that became far more pressing and untenable on October 7 by working more closely with Israel. This means supporting Israel's goal of eliminating Hamas's military and governance capabilities, and ensuring Iran and its proxies have no credible claim to victory in Gaza. President Biden's reflexive moral clarity about the evil Hamas represents, and about Israel's right and duty to remove it – quickly reinforced by other top U.S. officials – drew a crucially important, but only starting, line for the entire region.

A decisive Israeli dismantling of Hamas's power, and that of other terrorist groups like PIJ, is a prerequisite for rebuilding Gaza, from which all other possibilities flow. A better life for Gazans and a viable political horizon for Palestinians require that the roles of Hamas and Iran in Gaza are ended, and that deep reforms create a capable PA that neither faces a threat from Hamas nor tries to compete with Hamas for the mantle of anti-Israeli resistance. A decisive Israeli win is also a prerequisite for addressing the larger Iranian challenge, of which Gaza is but the most immediate crisis. 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.

Conversely, the Biden administration will jeopardize each of these possibilities if it softens its crucial support for Israel's legitimate self-defense. Pushing Israel to terminate major combat operations prematurely, and publicly criticizing its lawful tactics, risks playing into Hamas's strategy of ending the IDF's campaign short of fully destroying Hamas as the military and governing authority in Gaza. Such an outcome would only undermine Israel's security and rebuilding of deterrence. It also would fuel Arab fears and Iranian suspicions of America's unreliability as a steadfast ally, encourage further aggression throughout the ring of fire, and undermine any chance of advancing a peaceful future for Gaza.

In addition, the United States must take the lead in addressing the parallel, but more widely shared, threat made equally clear by October 7: the centerpiece challenge from Hezbollah at the heart of Iran's imperial project, including its domination of Lebanon and projection of Iranian power into the Levant and the Mediterranean. Ending hostilities in Gaza represents but one step in dealing with the unacceptable Iran-led regional threat, since tens of thousands of Israelis cannot reinhabit the north until the problem of Hezbollah's Radwan forces along the Lebanese border is resolved. The Biden administration's recent diplomatic probes to push these forces permanently away from the Blue Line, in long-overdue compliance with UNSCR 1701, are welcome initial signals. But they will only succeed if backed by robust U.S. military preparations and substantial material support that maximizes the credibility and urgency of Israel's own coercive threats.⁴³

This must include back-channel but unsubtle messages from the Biden administration, 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 – messages that will be all the more compelling if paired with U.S. military readiness activities and continued large-scale resupply for the IDF. 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. The key to successful deterrence and management of regional escalation dynamics is to focus Tehran and its proxies on how much they have to lose if the conflict spreads.⁴⁴

The monumental stakes of the Israel-Hezbollah standoff for everyone in the region, including the United States, is matched only by Tehran's perch on the precipice of nuclear weapons capability.⁴⁵ Before October 7, the credibility of Israeli redlines was the last best hope to stop Iran from achieving all the components of a nuclear device, and with it the nightmare scenario of a de facto nuclear threat to the entire Middle East. With Israel's deterrence severely weakened and the IDF straining on multiple other fronts, the United States must unequivocally halt its open-ended and conciliatory diplomacy that seeks to delay or even ignore this accelerating threat – another example of the disastrous consequences of simply kicking every can down the road. Rather than continuing to view this as yet another – and now even bigger – distraction from other priorities, it is all the more important that the United States treat Iran's nuclear program as central to solving this larger problem set, and thus one requiring assertive U.S. leadership and deterrence. This also makes bolstering Israel's ability to credibly threaten Iran more important and urgent.

With the IDF facing multiple manpower- and firepower-intense conflicts at once, U.S. support also must involve 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 have been significantly depleted in the ongoing Gaza operation.

Maintain Momentum for a Regional Coalition

The United States must resume its efforts to deepen Israel-Arab strategic and diplomatic ties, centered on Israel-Saudi normalization, in this larger drive toward a new security architecture. Allowing Hamas's attack to derail these vital initiatives would just worsen the very same problems the Biden administration has devoted so much time and resources to try to solve. Only American leadership can provide the necessary security and economic commitments to convince Arab partners to help counter Iran-led threats. The United States' irreplicable ability to offer such additional inducements should be leveraged to incentivize greater Arab participation in quickly acting to help fill Gaza's emerging humanitarian crisis and governance vacuum, and in overhauling the PA to make it a viable peace partner for Israel and the region.

To progress on this front, the United States first must reassert functional deterrence. The Biden administration's efforts to stand up a maritime coalition in the Red Sea is a welcome first step that must be leavened with stronger and sustained measures to both deny and punish Houthi attacks and send an unambiguous message to Iran and its other proxies that the United States is prepared to escalate as necessary to fulfill its repeated pledges to protect freedom of navigation on the high seas – a core U.S. national security objective dating back to the founding of the Republic, and an explicit goal in the Biden administration's 2022 National Defense Strategy.⁴⁶ Such moves can assuage Saudis' and other Arabs' fears that Tehran will continue holding their economies and societies at risk, and stymieing their efforts to move on from Yemen's disastrous civil war, pursue ambitious domestic priorities, and work more closely with the United States and Israel.

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