

## Ceasefire Part 3 – Where is the Exit?

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### Key Points

- The most likely option for Gaza moving forward given current conditions is permanent Israeli occupation and displacement of the Palestinian people on the Strip.
- Israel has not achieved the initial war aims, and mission creep is setting in where control of Gaza is now only a smaller part of a larger strategy, aiming to completely alter the dynamics in the Middle East for its own purposes. Israel's exit strategy from the war in Gaza is now a de facto entanglement.
- Hamas still constitutes a threat, although not an existential threat to Israel. However, permanent occupation to contain the threat will likely result in severe regional challenges for Israel in the longer term and new strategic issues due to the severity of the humanitarian situation and the lack of resolution or an acceptable solution for the Palestinians.
- This could also become a major problem for the U.S., as they seek to balance the relationship with Mideast partners and the broader international community, with that of their longtime ally Israel.
- Supporting and reframing the Egyptian/Arab League Plan would be beneficial for conflict resolution, as it carries similarities to the President's proposal for Gaza without displacing civilians or exposing the U.S. to further international tensions.
- If the situation continues to evolve in the current direction, it will likely result in new wide-ranging strategic issues that would have to be dealt with by USCENTCOM. This could end up creating further resource competition between focus on the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific Area.
- This risk will increase significantly if Israel acts in a manner that results in pushing Palestinian refugees toward Jordan and Egypt, bringing with it further regional tensions and potentially widening of armed conflict.

### Introduction

The war in Gaza is well into its second year, without significant progress toward a resolution, despite substantial efforts from mediators and the international community. Negotiations intensified toward the end of 2024, and on January 19, 2025, an initial phase of a ceasefire was implemented. While the first phase largely followed the terms of the agreement, the deal ultimately collapsed due to failed negotiations on the more challenging second phase, leading to an immediate return of Israeli strikes. Israel has since March 18, 2025, when the ceasefire broke down, clarified their aim to take complete military control of the Gaza Strip.

Over the past years, CSAG has closely monitored the conflict, publishing a series of strategy papers on the ceasefire and two additional papers addressing the Palestinian issue in general, offering a balanced perspective to understand

the historical conflict and assess the different stakes involved.<sup>1</sup> To provide a comprehensive view on the current situation, the analysis in this third paper in the Ceasefire-series has been divided into two parts. The first part assesses the war through three different lenses; “conflict ripeness”, exit strategy, and negotiation/mediation strategy. The second part highlights four different scenarios, with different benefits and risks, to provide an analysis of the most plausible way forward. This paper examines the prospects for a lasting ceasefire/cessation of hostilities and the most likely path for the future of Gaza given the current conditions.

## **Method**

The three different lenses/concepts have been used as a foundation for the analysis of the current state of the war and what it means for the future of Gaza. The analysis also considers conclusions from the two previous papers in the CSAG’s series about a ceasefire in Gaza, the first one in which the actors’ threat perceptions were addressed and the second one where the impact of the regional escalation was considered.<sup>2</sup>

## **Foundation for the analysis**

The explanations and definitions below clarify the theoretical and conceptual lenses through which the analysis has been carried out.

### *Conflict Ripeness*

The concept of ripeness in conflicts emphasizes the critical role of timing and decision points in conflict resolution. Understanding conflict ripeness serves multiple purposes: it helps policymakers assess the timing of mediation and negotiation efforts, while also enabling belligerents to evaluate their opportunities for pursuing their objectives.<sup>3</sup> A ripe moment occurs when a party to a conflict realizes that the costs of continuing the conflict outweigh the benefits of moving toward resolution. However, the importance of timing should not be overstated or seen as the sole factor for success in negotiations or mediation. Instead, it should be viewed as one of several key enablers for successful conflict resolution.<sup>4</sup>

“Ripeness is just a condition: it is not self-fulfilling or self-implementing. It must be seized, either directly from the parties or, if not, through the persuasion of a mediator.”<sup>5</sup>

Ripeness consists of two key components, which are Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS) and the ability for the belligerents to envision a way out.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the optimal moment to initiate or intensify negotiations occurs when both components are present, creating an opportunity that can be seized.<sup>7</sup>

### *Exit Strategies*

Planning of military operations is centered around the process of how to use the military instrument of power (military capabilities) within time and space to achieve an objective, or a set of objectives, with an acceptable level of risk.<sup>8</sup> The belligerents in this conflict are vastly different—one a state, the other an armed terrorist group—but both likely follow a strategic logic to achieve their objectives. Each side likely has a plan for how, when, and where to use their capabilities, as well as the risks they are willing to take. The planning is usually accompanied by a vision

of how and when an operation should end. As noted in the section on "conflict ripeness," it's crucial for parties to see a way out. Therefore, understanding exit strategies is crucial.

When analyzing exit strategies, it's important to identify each side's political and military objectives and end states, as these shape the conditions under which they may accept an exit. Historically, failures in exit planning have led to strategic uncertainty and mission creep, as the chaotic nature of war makes finding an exit increasingly difficult.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, some argue that planning for an exit in the beginning of an operation is premature, as the inherently uncertain nature of war or armed conflict makes it difficult to predict when and how operational objectives will be achieved.

### *Negotiation / Mediation Strategy*

Contemporary conflicts are rarely resolved solely on the battlefield, making negotiation and mediation crucial for a sustainable ceasefire. Identifying the challenges and opportunities within these processes is key to effective conflict resolution and seizing windows of opportunity for de-escalation.

A successful negotiation occurs when both sides see the outcome as more beneficial than the alternative, which often involves compromise and recognition of each party's equal standing. This process is typically driven by each side's cost/benefit analysis. There are three primary ways to achieve compromise: concession, compensation, and reframing.<sup>10</sup>

Mediation can take various forms depending on the nature of the conflict and the mediator's role, but it always involves a third party. This third party may act simply as a facilitator, without authority over the outcome, or may have the leverage to impose incentives—either positive or negative—to advance the negotiations, often referred to as "mediation with muscle." Regardless of the approach, successful mediation depends on the willingness and voluntary participation of the belligerents.<sup>11</sup>

Mediation is not only a conflict resolution process but also a powerful foreign policy tool. While it can be used to end hostilities for the greater good, it can also be leveraged more cynically to gain influence in a world marked by constant competition and rivalry.

### **War Aims and End-States**

As mentioned in the section above, it is important to identify the belligerents' different war aims and end-states for the conflict at hand to effectively analyze the prospects for a cessation of hostilities through these lenses. Despite the clear interlinkage with the current ceasefire and the question of Palestine in the larger context, the analysis is predominantly focused on the situation between the two opponents Hamas and Israel in Gaza.

#### *Hamas War Aims*

- The Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, marked a clear departure from the lower-intensity guerilla tactics used since 2007 and the ambition to portray themselves as a legitimate political actor.
- The shift suggests that one of Hamas's main strategic goals was to reintroduce the Palestinian issue to the international stage by provoking a disproportionate Israeli response in Gaza.<sup>12</sup>

- In turn this would lead to another strategic interest for Hamas, namely disrupting Israel's normalization with neighboring countries, hoping for Arab support.
- A key military objective appears to have been capturing hostages to use as leverage for a prisoner swap, probably unknowingly about what role the hostages would come to play.<sup>13</sup>
- The clearest current priority for Hamas after almost two years of war is to see a withdrawal of Israeli forces.

#### *Hamas End-State*

- Hamas suffer from internal differences relating to their view on Gaza, as the organization has different centers of power for their leadership, both within and outside of the Strip. This is creating challenges to accurately assess their preferred end state in the current war, given the damage to their command structure.
- Survival is now the most crucial aspect for Hamas Gazan leadership given how weakened they are from Israeli attacks, with the hostages playing a larger role than simply a leverage to get Palestinian prisoners out.
- The optics of being able to take Israeli hostages and keep them for such a prolonged period, is also part of the bigger strategy and is reinforcing Israeli insecurity, which is beneficial for Hamas' goal of destabilizing the state and causing internal political damage.
- The terrible situation and trauma amongst Palestinians due to the ongoing war is still to some extent beneficial regarding Hamas' long-term ideological goals since it foments hate against Israel for future generations and reinforces the notion of martyrdom within the context of resistance.

#### *Israel War Aims*

- Israel has been clear that their priorities are to destroy Hamas' military and governing capabilities, free the hostages, ensure that Gaza can never harbor a threat against Israelis again, and to "deradicalize and demilitarize" the Strip.<sup>14</sup>
- While Hamas is clearly weakened and pushed back on their heels, they are not eradicated and since the hostages are not yet returned, Israel has only partially achieved their war aims.
- Israel has been adding objectives to their war agenda, such as the return of displaced Israeli citizens to the north, and more recently, permanent full military control of Gaza to achieve their war aims.

#### *Israel End State*

- With the time that has passed without successfully having reached their war aims, Israeli has likely suffered from mission creep.
- The previous absence of a clear and coherent strategy for Gaza post-war has benefitted Israeli tactical and operational freedom of action but has created a strategic quagmire which counterintuitively undermines opportunities to reach the war aims mentioned above.
- Permanent control over Gaza has now been presented as a clear end state for Gaza. It remains uncertain how this will be sustained over time and what that means for the people living there.
- To control the entire Strip is only a part of the ultimate end state, which is to alter the dynamic in the Middle East.<sup>15</sup>

### **The January 2025 Ceasefire Agreement**

The ceasefire agreement implemented on January 19, 2025, largely mirrored the proposal put forward by the previous U.S. administration in May 2024. The agreement consisted of three phases. A significant issue with the deal was that the latter two stages were only agreed upon in principle, not in detail, prior to the commencement of the first phase. This became apparent when the ceasefire collapsed in March 2025. Additionally, the agreement did not outline how Gaza should be governed beyond the implementation of the second phase of the ceasefire. Below is a summary of the key elements in each phase:

Phase 1 – The agreement included the release of several hostages in exchange for a significant number of Palestinian prisoners, Israeli withdrawal from major populated areas, facilitation of the return of displaced people, increased humanitarian aid, initiation of rehabilitation efforts, and temporary cessation of hostilities.

Phase 2 – This phase was intended to commence after the successful implementation of the first phase. The agreement called for the permanent establishment of the ceasefire, the release of the remaining living hostages in exchange for additional Palestinian prisoners, and the full withdrawal of Israeli troops.

Phase 3 – Exchange of all the remains of Israeli and Palestinian casualties, a formal end to the war, and implementation of reconstruction plans.<sup>16</sup>

The first phase of the ceasefire was intended to end early on March 2, 2025, but on February 27, Israel declared they would remain in the Philadelphi corridor to prevent weapons smuggling into Gaza.<sup>17</sup> On March 2, a complete halt of humanitarian aid going into Gaza was imposed as Israel, together with the U.S., had been pushing for an extension of the first phase of the ceasefire until mid-April, which Hamas rejected.<sup>18</sup> A week later, on March 9, Israel cut off the remaining electricity supply which exacerbated conditions on top of the already severe water shortage.<sup>19</sup> The ceasefire completely broke down on March 18, with resumed Israeli air attacks followed by a renewed ground offensive that is continuously expanding.<sup>20</sup> Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Israeli government have since made clear Israel will take full military control over the Strip. This planning also includes controlling the distribution of humanitarian aid, which has started back up in a small and insufficient scale with large amounts of Palestinian casualties at the aid hubs.<sup>21</sup> Negotiations mediated by the U.S., Egypt, and Qatar are still ongoing but are primarily focused on a return to a ceasefire rather than longer term solutions.<sup>22</sup>

### **Analysis**

The analysis presented below is divided into two distinct sections. The first section offers a broad evaluation of the war in Gaza, grounded in the theoretical and conceptual frameworks outlined in this paper. The second section provides a more concrete analysis of options for Gaza's future through four different scenarios.

#### **1. Part 1 - Overall Assessment of the War**

##### *Conflict Ripeness*

When assessing ripeness in relation to conflicts, it is crucial to evaluate whether the different components of ripeness collectively create the conditions for a conflict to be ready for resolution. This is particularly evident in the Hamas-Israel war, where one could argue that ripeness has emerged and faded multiple times throughout

the conflict, with windows of opportunity for meaningful negotiations opening and closing. Conversely, it is also possible to argue that the conflict has never truly been ripe for a final resolution. These opposing perspectives are closely tied to whether the analysis focuses on the military or political dimensions of the conflict.

When looking at the main components of ripeness, a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS), is the most salient, and means there is a situation in a conflict when there is no decisive win in sight and the belligerents are hurting more from staying in it than from negotiating a way out. From a military perspective, in the second year of the war, there has not been a decisive win in sight so far. The IDF have failed to fully achieve the Israeli war aims, and while Hamas is not defeated, they have been decimated in terms of operational capability and leadership. It makes sense to also assess the situation in similar terms when looking at the political level, as it is hard to see how the Israeli government, after many months of warfare, would be able to now see a decisive victory, unless they aim to follow through on a complete political and military takeover of Gaza. However, while a militarily decimated Hamas cannot see a decisive win when it comes to their end state of survival, remaining in power and destruction of the state of Israel, they have achieved some of their war aims related to regaining international attention on the Palestinian question and getting many prisoners back. The main issue related to reaching MHS is therefore more connected to how much pain the belligerents can accept. While Hamas is most likely hurting more from staying in the conflict than looking for a way out, Israel has time after time shown there is a strong resilience against internal and external critique against their conduct of war. When looking at other factors such as economy, Israel has also displayed a strong resilience despite the costliness of the war. There are also internal political interests within the Israeli government which override any receptiveness regarding the pain inflicted by the continuous war. Hence, the conditions for MHS are not fully met, which is a partial explanation to why negotiations are ineffective.

The second condition for ripeness requires that both parties perceive a negotiated way out as more beneficial than continued stalemate. While Hamas may see an exit as essential for its survival, it likely considers the options currently on the table unacceptable, particularly if its general existence is in jeopardy and a fundamental shift in Israel's position on troop withdrawal is not included. Further, another related issue for Hamas is the pressure on their disarmament, which, despite if they were given guarantees on some continued political influence, would effectively be a cessation of their military existence. Meanwhile, Israel finds it difficult to withdraw without achieving its war aims and, due to domestic political considerations, is reluctant to advance to Phase 2 of the ceasefire or work toward a sustainable solution acceptable to both sides. Overall, the main conditions for ripeness are not met, making a beneficial decision point and resolution unlikely in the near term.

### *Exit Strategies*

As the conflict has evolved, it has become increasingly questionable whether either belligerent had a well-defined exit strategy in place at the outset of the war. Hamas, as the instigator, seemingly operated under the assumption that Israel would not sustain such an intense and prolonged military campaign under increasing international pressure. Instead, they likely expected a short period of retaliatory strikes, followed by a swift negotiation for a large-scale exchange of hostages for Palestinian prisoners, ultimately returning to the pre-war status quo—albeit with heightened international attention on Gaza and the broader issue of violence against Palestinian civilians. However, the conflict took a different trajectory, leaving Hamas in a situation where its primary leverage to force an Israeli withdrawal and rebuild its organization is the continued holding of hostages as bargaining chips. There is no doubt that there is no longer a place for Hamas to have complete political authority over Gaza which they likely recognize, but the question is to what lengths they are willing to go to ensure their continued existence.<sup>23</sup>

The Israeli end state has seemingly shifted from a situation where they were aiming to achieve their war aims to reduce the security threat against them, to a much more ambitious political vision regarding the future of not only Gaza but also for reshaping the dynamic in the Middle East. This vision involves a permanent takeover of Gaza, while securing it, and completely ousting Hamas. This paper has not addressed the increasing tensions related to Israeli presence and settlement prospects in other areas, but it is important to still mention the strong interconnectedness with the developments in Golan Heights, the Westbank, and expanding interests in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime.

There doesn't appear to be an Israeli exit strategy, their approach being to navigate through the challenges they face in achieving their war aims, which they adapt as the situation changes. Without the definitive demise of Hamas and an Israeli willingness to end the war, the conflict could be indefinite.

### *Observations on Current Negotiation and Mediation Strategy*

The numerous twists and turns in the negotiation and mediation efforts over the past year have highlighted several significant challenges to resolving the conflict. As discussed in the first and second papers of CSAG's Ceasefire Series, many of these challenges stem from the belligerents' ideational and material threat perceptions. Additionally, there are more tangible issues related to the content of a ceasefire agreement, as well as external factors that are interconnected with the ongoing war in Gaza.<sup>24</sup> This section aims to highlight a few issues related to the overall strategy of negotiation/mediation and the most prominent concepts of how to achieve compromise, a notion needed for the most peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Mediating between Israel and Hamas is challenging due to the stark differences between the belligerents' characters, making it hard to establish an equal footing in negotiations. The situation is further complicated by differing views on resolving the Palestinian issue, especially with U.S., Egypt, and Qatar holding conflicting positions. This presents two main problems: first, the need to reconsider the mediator group, potentially adding states with more leverage; and second, the lack of unified Palestinian representation. Hamas, as the primary actor, controls the power to make decisions on ceasefire terms, while Israel has repeatedly stated that no Palestinian entity is seen as a viable negotiation partner.

Reframing could theoretically help de-escalate tensions and shift narratives to reduce threat perceptions. However, it's unlikely that either Hamas or Israel would change their views on the conflict. Mediators may also avoid publicly pursuing reframing due to the risk of losing domestic political support. Compensation is an unlikely path towards compromise, as Hamas has no means nor intention to take responsibility for the atrocities committed on October 7, 2023. Additionally, there is currently no indication that Israel is willing to compensate for the war damages. The most pragmatic effort to pursue in relation to reframing would be to alter the view and the composition of the Palestinian Authority (PA), as this would provide opportunities for solving the governance dimension of the conflict.

This means that the most plausible way to make progress is to focus on the third main concept for achieving compromise, namely concessions. Israel has weak incentives to concede, as it has publicly stated it will continue the war until all its objectives are achieved/hostages are freed. The U.S. is the only mediator with convincing influence to potentially reshape Israel's stance, but it has strongly supported Israel's pursuit of its war aims, as evidenced by its repeated vetoes on proposed UN security council resolutions which are aimed at curtailing Israel's freedom of action in Gaza. Hamas, on the other hand, may be more open to concessions, as they are not in a position of strength. However, it remains uncertain if Qatar and Egypt have the leverage to pressure Hamas into making such concessions of the highly necessary disarmament. Moreover, both Qatar and Egypt have

entrenched positions on the Palestinian issue and are unlikely to encourage concessions that don't also ensure Israel commits to a more favorable solution for the Palestinian people.

Despite the bleak outlook, there are options that could improve the situation if the parties are willing to step outside of political interests for the sake of not only human lives and suffering, but also for increased long-term stability and decreased radicalization. The strategy of 'mediation with muscle' could be used but aimed at both belligerents. The U.S. is willing to support intense pressure on Hamas. The U.S. could take a muscular approach with Israel too, making U.S. materiel support for Israel contingent upon concrete efforts towards de-escalation.

## 2. Part 2 - Four Possible Scenarios for the Future of Gaza

### 1. Ceasefire within the Previous Framework

- Despite ongoing negotiations for a renewed ceasefire, there is currently a low probability of full implementation of what has previously been agreed upon for the second and third phase in the previous ceasefire deal. Israel now controls over 70 % of Gaza and is showing little indication that they would be willing to withdraw even if the remaining hostages were released and Hamas started to disarm.<sup>25</sup>
- The more likely outcome is that Hamas will eventually concede to a limited period of truce in exchange for additional hostage releases, and thereafter, the cycle of violence will resume with continued Israeli attacks.
- The increased Israeli control and renewed attacks have resulted in further increased suffering for the civilian population, with humanitarian aid woefully inadequate and famine reportedly imminent.
- There are some caveats to this assumption that could alter the dynamic. If mediation and negotiations result in Hamas disarmament, it is more likely Israel would be pushed to accept a more extensive agreement on troop withdrawal. This does however require that the U.S. would also increase pressure on Israeli withdrawal, as the U.S. is the only country with enough influence over Israel.
- The U.S. President's proposal for Gaza as presented at the press conference with Prime Minister Netanyahu on February 4 has resulted in confusion as to what the U.S. wants to achieve in their role as mediators, and how the proposal fits into the ceasefire agreement and reaching the second and third phase.



Figure 1 – Israeli buffer zone April 2025<sup>26</sup>

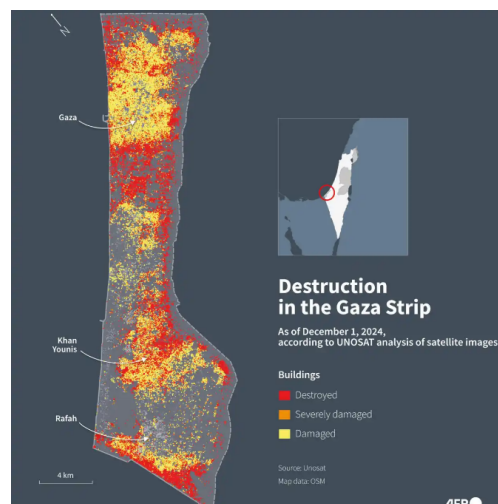


Figure 2 – Destruction in the Gaza Strip<sup>27</sup>



## 2. *Permanent U.S./Israeli Control*

- The prospect of some form of permanent control or occupation over Gaza is becoming more likely due to recent developments. However, without a clear U.S. policy, it remains uncertain how the administration envisions its role, whether Gaza would be under Israeli control or with increased U.S. involvement on the territory. Israel's continued reference to the "Trump Plan" may limit U.S. flexibility in shaping a new approach and complicate relations with international partners.<sup>28</sup>
- Permanent control could benefit Israel by eliminating Hamas's presence near its borders and establishing full security control. However, this would likely result in even more severe humanitarian consequences for Palestinians, international condemnation, disruption of normalization with Arab states, and increased radicalization, ultimately undermining Israeli security in both the short and long term.
- It would likely come at the cost of significant Israeli military casualties, constant security operations, and a long-term drain on resources and morale.
- There are several indications that displacement of civilians is included in the Israeli planning. Israel has also devised Operation Gideon Chariot's for full military rule of Gaza, which appears to match how events are unfolding on the ground.<sup>29</sup>
- The legality of a plan contingent on mass displacement of civilians is in question. Further, with Palestinians unlikely to leave voluntarily, there is a high likelihood of mass casualties.
- Economically, Israel and the U.S. might see opportunities for development and future trade. Still, full occupation would incur massive costs, require substantial subsidies for Gaza, and expose Israel to potential international sanctions due to legal and humanitarian concerns.
- Another aspect important for the U.S. to consider is how this path will affect the strategic goal of pivoting to the Indo-Pacific Area.

## 3. *The Egyptian/Arab League Plan for Gaza*

- The Egyptian and Arab League plan, countering the Trump Gaza proposal and voiced Israeli plans for further occupation, rests on the sentiment that civilian Palestinians should not be displaced outside of Gaza while the removing of rubble and reconstruction take place in phases. This is therefore more likely to gain international support as it is more compatible with international law. The plan also includes a transitional administration through the Palestinian Authority (PA) to govern instead of Hamas, inclusivity of influential Palestinian groups in the process, ensuring security by training Palestinian personnel, and implies peacekeeping forces sanctioned by the UN.<sup>30</sup>
- The two biggest diplomatic risks/challenges are to gain acceptance for a long-term governance option and PA involvement. For the plan to succeed, it needs to gain acceptance by Israel and the U.S., otherwise it would be both impossible to implement and an investment in vain given the risk of continued Israeli attacks if they are not satisfied with the conditions.
- An agreement to move forward with the plan could assist the normalization process between Israel and the Arab countries and would directly benefit the U.S. relationship with their partners and allies in the region. This could benefit the security of the Palestinians, Israelis, and the whole region in the longer-term.
- The largest military implication to the plan regards maintaining security in the territory while reconstruction and the disarmament of Hamas takes place. It would require significant troop presence, both to maintain order and to ensure continued ousting of Hamas and other militant groups. If the plan fails to move forward with the rehabilitation as fast as planned, it will come with a risk of growing internal tensions in Gaza as well as significant costs in terms of security forces.
- Estimated to be more than \$50 billion dollars, the rehabilitation of Gaza is a big economic risk to take for the Arab countries who would likely be the main economic sponsors.<sup>31</sup> If successful, a

revitalization of Gaza in the future may however bring economic opportunities to both the territory and for the region, which in turn supports stability. From a U.S. perspective the plan is beneficial if the administration wants to minimize the risks of boots on the ground and economic investments in an unstable environment.

- From the Israeli perspective, it would be beneficial to come to an agreement with the Arab countries. Sustaining the war has become very costly not only in human lives but also for the Israeli economy, with the war costing an estimated \$66 billion USD by the end of 2025.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. *International Peacekeeping Mission*

- There is currently no indication that an international/UN mission in line with previous peacekeeping, transitional governance, and state building efforts that have reached reasonable success in the past, such as in East Timor and Liberia, would be a plausible option to pursue in Gaza.
- A stable ceasefire would be needed for such a mission to be deployed, and it would also have to be based on consent and an acceptance of a common end state.
- Given the Israeli and U.S. current outright skepticism of the UN as a supranational organization, and Hamas' likely reluctance, there might also be a struggle to rely on the UN for any other smaller responsibilities that could be included in any of the other scenarios.
- It is for most countries, both in and outside of Europe, considered a high-cost, low-reward mission unless a sustainable governance and security strategy is presented and agreed upon. Furthermore, as Europe is racing to build up their own defenses in light of the war in Ukraine and that the U.S. has pressed for Europe to carry more of the burden of its own defense, many countries that historically have been strong providers of support to peacekeeping missions are likely struggling with resources and political priorities.
- Many countries in Europe do however favor a two-state solution and to end Palestinian suffering. As large European powers such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom have started to push the question of Gaza and Palestine higher on the agenda, it is possible to see a greater support from Europe for the Egyptian/Arab League Plan.<sup>33</sup> This could imply a momentum for European countries to act for more involvement in the mediation process or to push another solution, but may come with the risk of increasing diplomatic tensions with Israel and the U.S.

## **Conclusion**

1. Currently, the most likely option for Gaza moving forward is permanent Israeli occupation and displacement of the Palestinian people on the Strip. Israel has not achieved their initial war aims, and mission creep is becoming clear where control of Gaza is now only a smaller part of a much bigger picture aiming to completely alter the dynamics in the Middle East. Israel's exit strategy from the war is a de facto non-exit.
2. Hamas still constitutes a threat to Israel and while for now, no longer an existential threat, Israel believes the threat is sufficient to justify their ongoing military actions, including increased "collateral damage." However, permanent occupation will likely result in severe regional challenges for Israel in the longer term and new strategic issues due to the severity of the humanitarian situation. This will become a major problem also for the U.S., regarding the relationship with other partners in the region and the rest of the international community.
3. The international community does not have a unified stance on the situation and several severe security challenges place inherent strains on finite resources and military capabilities. The recalibrated transatlantic relationship triggered by the new U.S. administration, and a long period without strong European leadership in foreign policy, is limiting, but not yet removing, the possibilities of finding viable solutions for the conflict that are coherent with international law.

4. The wait and see game that Israel has played when it comes to a strategy for the future of Gaza has served them well – it has left other protagonists reacting to events rather than shaping them for advantage. If there is going to be any possibility of stopping the loss of human lives, reducing the risk of mass radicalization, and decreasing the risk of regional escalation that likely would follow a permanent occupation and potential further displacement of civilians—now is the time for the rest of the international community to take the initiative.
5. It should be possible to resolve the conflict and find an exit from the conflict in Gaza considering the pressure on Hamas and that there is a reasonable way out being offered through the Egyptian/Arab League Plan. This does however imply that Israel and Hamas must be willing, or at least both see no other option, to make certain concessions in relation to troop presence and disarmament to get to a renewed ceasefire. Alternatively, if an agreement of a fair, long-term solution could be reached between the Arab states, the PA, U.S., and Israel, it would open doors for moving on with the implementation of the ceasefire framework.
6. The Egyptian/Arab League plan not only offers a way out of the conflict for Israel (and the U.S.) that from a CSAG perspective would allow the Palestinian people to live in their homeland, but it would also be more economically and diplomatically beneficial, and offers Israel increased security in the long-term, which is a legitimate concern. The main issue is that Israel for internal political reasons is unlikely to make such concessions, unless pressured by the U.S. Given recent history, Israel also likely views the handover of responsibility for the security of Gaza to anyone else a big risk.
7. The clear pattern of actors institutionalizing divergence further away from international law is not only a problem for solving conflicts within a legal framework and for human suffering, but also for the overall development of conflict resolution in both inter and intrastate conflicts. If respect for international law, and the institutions meant to safeguard these values is not promptly regained and strongly promoted, the effectiveness and relevance of the rules-based order will continue to wane.

### **What can be done?**

- Supporting and reframing the Egyptian/Arab League Plan would be beneficial for conflict resolution and for the U.S., as it carries similarities to the President’s proposal for Gaza without the risk of displacing civilians or exposing the U.S. to further international tensions.
- The U.S. could use a mediation with muscle strategy directed at both Hamas and Israel to achieve results in the negotiations and get both parties to make concessions.
- Overall, mediation and negotiation strategy would benefit from being directed towards the Egyptian/Arab League Plan. The European countries should support this effort, which may put them at diplomatic odds with the U.S., but it’s an opportunity to stand up for the rules-based security order, international law, human rights, and to show the new U.S. Administration that Europe is being proactive in the Middle East.
- War gaming the Egyptian/Arab League Plan with Israeli and Palestinian experts to navigate around each obstacle in the plan, develop improvements and ensure that sequencing within the plan supports implementation.
- Further, the U.S. can under certain conditions, such as increased European involvement and support, push for acceptance of a Palestinian entity as a partner for a long-term solution.
- Intensified pressure on Israel by actors such as France, UK, Canada, Germany, and the EU, with a revised option compatible with international law could raise a discussion about a Responsibility to Protect (R2P) mission to the UN agenda. While unlikely to gain security council support, it would highlight the urgency of the situation and may give actors involved reason to reconsider their stance.

## Implications for USCENTCOM

- If the situation in Gaza continues the current trajectory, it will likely perpetuate the cycle of violence and instability which has plagued the region. CENTCOM will likely have to continue to respond to this instability to defend U.S. interests in the region, posing an enduring challenge to the national strategy and diverting finite capabilities away from other priority tasking.
- This risk will increase significantly if Israel attempts to push Palestinian refugees toward Jordan and Egypt, carrying the risk of regional tensions and horizontal escalation.
- The Israeli goal of changing the dynamic in the Middle East has already affected CENTCOM. The 12-Day war which saw an exchange of fire between Israel and Iran brought the U.S. into the fight. Even without Operation Midnight Hammer, the U.S. was committed to the defense of Israel, requiring significant posture surge into the region. This also diverted attention from Gaza, although the conflict there continues to be destabilizing for the region.
- While Hamas remains a security threat, it is not currently existential for Israel and not a threat to the U.S. homeland. However, Israel's actions in Gaza and the U.S.'s unconditional support for Israel could be sufficient catalyst for further radicalization which could metastasize into further regional instability and a threat to the U.S. Homeland.
- The humanitarian aid situation is becoming more severe with the Gaza Humanitarian Aid foundation struggling to carry out its mission. Given the scale of the challenge in Gaza, this may yet have implications for USCENTCOM in the form of increased involvement and military support.
- The continued suffering amongst the Palestinian population may also come with operational and tactical implications for important access, basing, and overflight (ABO) for CENTCOM.
- Additional implications for USCENTCOM of the war in Gaza have also been presented in several papers by the CSAG; Panacea for Gaza, Ceasefire Part 1 – Understanding Threat Perception, Ceasefire Part 2 – Regional Escalation, From Impasse to Progress: A Reasonable Solution That Tackles Obstacles and Opportunities to Gaza Stability, and the President's Proposed Alternative for Gaza.<sup>34</sup>

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