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In response to its devastating October 7, 2023 attack, Israeli leaders have stated that they seek to “destroy” Hamas—a goal easier in rhetoric than in reality.¹ Israel’s actions—bombing Gaza, sending in troops to kill Hamas fighters and destroy Hamas’ infrastructure, and targeting Hamas leaders in Gaza and around the region—have killed over 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza, including many children. In solidarity with Hamas, Iranian-backed groups have conducted attacks against Israeli and US targets around the region.² If, understandably, Israel is loath to allow Hamas a victory and seeks to ensure its security, what options does it have?

Israel has articulated several goals for Gaza, not all of which are complementary, and some of which are hard to distinguish as true strategy or political posturing.³ With this caveat in mind, we believe Israel intends to achieve some combination of the following:

- First, it seeks to destroy Hamas—but what “destroy” means in practice can vary anywhere from degrading its military capacity until another October 7 is no longer feasible for at least several years to ending the group once and for all by killing its leaders and shattering its military wing.⁴
- Second, Israel seeks the return of over 130 remaining hostages, including the bodies of those who have died.⁵

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- Third, Israel seeks to reassure its citizens and restore confidence in the military, intelligence services, and government in general, thus facilitating the return of residents who live near Lebanon and Gaza to their homes, thereby ending the country's worst internal displacement crisis in its history.⁶
- Fourth, Israel seeks to do all this at an acceptable cost, both to the lives of its soldiers and to its international reputation and support, especially in the United States.

To achieve these goals, this paper describes six non-mutually exclusive options for Israel, noting their requirements, advantages and risks. Loosely ordered from the option that can be most quickly implemented to the one that requires the longest implementation timeline, these are:

- 1) Return to an improved status quo ante in the near term—with Israel withdrawing from Gaza, Hamas probably returning to power, and Israel relying on a mix of strikes, deterrence and defenses to keep Hamas off-balance;
- 2) Create buffer zones to reduce the risk of infiltration as well as short-range rocket and mortar attacks against Israel;
- 3) “Shoot and scoot,” with Israel continuing its large-scale military operations in Gaza for the next several months before withdrawing its forces to return to a status quo ante;
- 4) Occupy Gaza for the long term with Israeli forces, which would systematically hunt down and destroy Hamas while effectively governing Gaza on a day-to-day basis;
- 5) Replace the Hamas government in Gaza with one run by the Palestinian Authority (PA), forces from Arab governments, the international community, or some combination—probably bolstered by Israeli military power; and
- 6) Conduct a sustained campaign of targeted killings of Hamas leaders in Gaza and around the world.

As mentioned above, some of these options can be pursued simultaneously, such as a targeted killing campaign and buffer zones. Although we favor a mix of approaches, we believe each is sufficiently distinct to warrant individual analysis, and we discuss when it might be appropriate to combine options.

Not all of these options are equally feasible, and all have costs, risks and limits—even if successful. We evaluate each based on several factors. These include Israel's capacity to execute the option; the human cost to Israel; the diplomatic costs, including damage to Israel's international reputation and progress toward regional normalization; the timeline involved; how much the option would satisfy domestic Israeli opinion; the harm to Hamas; the harm to Gaza

and Palestinian civilians there; the risk of a broader war; and the implications for peace with moderate Palestinians.

In addition, Israel must make these choices in a dynamic environment, as some factors may change over time. For example, international pressure on Israel will rise as disease and water scarcity lead to even more civilian deaths in Gaza, while the international politics around extremely costly reconstruction efforts will complicate Israel's attempts to maintain control over the situation.

In the end, none of the options are good—but some are less bad. Success for Israel requires embracing tradeoffs. We argue that Israel should continue its targeted killing campaign against Hamas leaders and implement an array of defensive measures to fortify against future attacks without displacing local populations as would be necessary for forming a buffer zone. Establishing a new government in Gaza is necessary and Israel should avoid an indefinite military occupation, but the choices for who should lead Gaza are poor, which will require Israel to engage in some form of “shoot-and-scoot,” involving near-constant military raids and other significant—but lower-intensity—military activity in Gaza in the near term.

None of the options are good—but some are less bad

Israel's Current Non-Strategy

Israeli leaders have yet to lay out a realistic long-term vision for Gaza beyond declaring that they will not return to a pre-October 7 situation that sees Hamas in power, able to rebuild and again threaten Israel. Since October 7, Israel has conducted a massive bombing campaign and sent five divisions into Gaza—roughly the same size force it deployed against Egypt in 1973 but concentrated in a much smaller area. Israeli forces have attacked Hamas fighters, leaders and infrastructure in Gaza, laying waste to much of the strip. At the same time, Israel has knocked down buildings along the Israel-Gaza border and appears to be preparing a buffer zone.⁷ Outside Gaza, Israel has attacked Hamas leaders in Lebanon.⁸

Israeli leaders have yet to lay out a realistic long-term vision for Gaza

Israel shows no sign of withdrawing its military or halting hostilities, despite growing international—and even US—pressure to do so. The greatest hope for a near-term ceasefire is likely the negotiated release of hostages held by Hamas. However, such a ceasefire would probably be only a temporary one.

Israeli leaders claim they do not intend to occupy Gaza indefinitely, but they have not made clear what would come next. There are no good options for what comes after the current offensive, but Israel must nonetheless decide.

Option One: Withdraw and then Bolster the Status Quo Ante

Israel is under increasing international pressure to withdraw its armed forces from Gaza and cease bombing. Even if Israel took such a step, it would not be content simply to return to the situation that prevailed before October 7, with Hamas ruling freely in Gaza, workers going from the Strip into Israel, Qatar building hospitals, and other conditions that look naive and dangerous in hindsight.

A more realistic version of this option would emphasize deterring future Hamas attacks, building up defenses, and keeping Hamas weak. Israel would bolster the security barrier along the border, perhaps adding layers of defenses. There would be more monitoring along the border, an increased intelligence effort focused on Gaza, and more troop and police deployments in case Hamas attackers again attempt to breach border defenses. Israel would also press Egypt to crack down on tunnels and smuggling to ensure that weapons and construction materials do not go into Gaza and fighters do not leave for training and return. Israel would increase the economic isolation of Gaza. Israel would also increase raids and air strikes on Gaza, attacking suspected arms caches and rocket sites as well as killing militant leaders.

A withdrawal combined with a tighter hold on Gaza has several advantages for Israel. It would be relatively easy to execute, at least compared with the other options, and its soldiers would not be in jeopardy, as they are now when they fight Hamas forces and suffer casualties. Israel could also do this immediately (though it would have to continue economic restrictions and raids indefinitely), and it would ease the international criticism of Israel and the growing concerns of the Biden administration. A withdrawal would also greatly reduce the risk of a wider war as Hezbollah, Iranian proxies, and other dangerous regional actors would have fewer excuses to become involved, and if they did, Israel could concentrate the full weight of its military against these enemies. In addition, it increases the chance of Saudi-Israeli normalization and otherwise bolstering good relations with moderate Arab states. Finally, a withdrawal would facilitate the return of Israeli hostages, with Hamas more likely to release them in exchange for a ceasefire as well as the release of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

In addition, a withdrawal instigated with the support of the Arab world and the Palestinian Authority (PA) leadership in the West Bank would enable restarting peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians. However, the current far-right Israeli government opposes such talks, and Prime Minister

Netanyahu himself has repeatedly voiced his skepticism.⁹ Although Netanyahu might fall from power, any successor would deal with an Israeli public highly suspicious of any concessions to the Palestinians. After October 7, ordinary Israelis are more suspicious of Palestinian intentions, and the death and destruction of Israel's military campaign has further outraged already-skeptical Palestinians.¹⁰ An Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in the near future will not undo the damage already done to the prospects of a political solution for peace, but it would create fewer obstacles than other options available to Israel.

Ordinary Palestinians in Gaza would both benefit and lose from this approach. On one hand, the military campaign that is costing hundreds of lives a day and devastating the Strip's economy would end sooner rather than later. On the other hand, the tighter Israeli control of the Strip would worsen the economic and humanitarian situation there and increase the already-high sense among ordinary Palestinians that they are trapped.

The biggest disadvantage for Israel is that Hamas would emerge victorious. Although the organization has lost many fighters and leaders, and Gaza itself has suffered tremendously, Hamas could claim that it hit Israel hard and remains in power—a political victory. Israelis would fear, justifiably, that Hamas could rebuild its organization and emerge even stronger, posing a constant threat. In addition, Israel would fear that deterrence would suffer because Hamas did not pay a sufficiently heavy price for such a devastating attack. All this would increase the perceived (and probably actual) risk to Israel while failing to satisfy domestic audiences who want their leaders to annihilate Hamas.

Option Two: Buffer Zones

Another possibility is to establish buffer zones, both within Gaza and outside it.¹¹ The zones would be “no-go” areas that individuals are not allowed to enter without permission, effectively pushing the border back several hundred yards or more. Israel appears to be beginning this process by leveling parts of Gaza near its border, and it could expand this zone further. Israel could also install multiple layers of security barriers and more sensors. The zones presumably would be paired with a quick reaction force, enabling the Israeli military to respond rapidly to any breach. In an extreme case, these areas might come to resemble the Korean demilitarized zone.

These zones would serve several purposes. First, they would hinder Hamas infiltrations of Israel—Hamas tunnels would need to be longer and remain undetected as they ran through the zones, as well as into Israel. They would also give Israel additional depth should Hamas try to penetrate border barriers or otherwise

force its way into Israel again. The zones themselves would impose little human cost on Israel.

Such zones, however, come with many problems. First, if the zones include land in Gaza, they will force the permanent displacement of many Palestinians, feeding the narrative that Israel seeks to annex Gaza and expel Palestinians in general—and the bigger the zone, the more acute this perception. This would increase criticism of Israel internationally, although probably not significantly enough to provoke Hezbollah or other enemies to abandon their current reluctance to engage in an all-out war with Israel. Israel would not only establish zones in the parts of Gaza it currently controls, but also in southern Gaza.

Buffer zones would not greatly improve Israel's security

Given the already-high population density of the Strip, displacing Palestinians from these areas would increase crowding in Gaza, further strain its already devastated food and water systems, and be seen as a form of annexation.

Nor would the buffer zones greatly improve Israel's security. Tunnels and border breaching would be more difficult, but given the range of

many Hamas rocket and mortar systems, the additional kilometers of no-go zones offer little additional protection.¹² Hamas itself might find the buffers frustrating, but they would not hurt the group's hold on power and thus allow it to claim a form of victory by its survival, even as the zones would further validate its message that Israel is bent on subjugating the Palestinians.

Option Three: Shoot and Scoot

As opposed to the immediate withdrawal of troops and short of a long-term military occupation of Gaza, Israel could pursue a short-term military occupation lasting the next several months before the withdrawal of IDF forces and the return to a bolstered status quo ante October 7, including such measures as improving defenses. In a short-term military occupation, Israel would seek to destroy as much of Hamas' tunnel infrastructure, rescue as many hostages, and kill as many Hamas fighters and leaders as possible before withdrawing ground forces. This approach still poses a risk to IDF ground forces and ordinary Palestinians in Gaza as the fighting continues for several months, but it would avoid the human toll of a likely counterinsurgency campaign in a long-term occupation. An end to Israel's military presence in Gaza in the next several months would also ease international criticism, reduce the risk of a wider regional war, and otherwise have at least some of the benefits of a status quo ante approach.

These challenges, however, could reach tipping points before even a short-term military occupation concludes.

The trickiest part of a short-term military occupation would be deciding when to leave. Israeli leaders have made several statements which suggest they are pursuing goals they cannot achieve in the short term, if at all. This includes the total destruction of Hamas and the assertion that Israel will maintain overall security control over Gaza.¹³ If Israel desires a short-term military occupation, it will need to change these goals and set clear benchmarks that would trigger troop withdrawals. Such benchmarks might include the elimination of a certain number of Hamas fighters or key leadership figures; the destruction of a certain percentage of Hamas tunnels and weapon caches; or the rescue of a certain number of Israeli hostages.

If Israel meets these goals, it can reasonably claim that its military mission in Gaza was a success and focus on bolstering its own defenses from future attack. Attainable military objectives with clear timelines increase the likelihood of satisfying Israeli domestic opinion. This option also enables pauses in the fighting which would allow negotiations over hostage releases. Importantly, a short-term military occupation that is successful in eliminating much of Hamas' leadership would need to be paired with another option which accounts for the long-term governance of Gaza. If not, Hamas will simply regenerate, militarily weaker but politically stronger.

Option Four: Military Occupation

Israel could also seek to maintain a military presence in Gaza for the long term, using its control of territory to find and kill Hamas fighters and leaders and to keep the group out of power. An Israeli occupation of Gaza would require some combination of winning the support of the Palestinian population, or, more realistically, reducing its anger and subduing the population's opposition to an Israeli military presence.¹⁴ If Israel chooses to emphasize the former, it would conduct kinetic operations against remaining armed groups while delivering public benefits like security, jobs and education—directly or through a Palestinian administration of some kind. If it emphasizes the latter, Israel would prioritize coercing Palestinians in Gaza over winning their support, building up its military and intelligence capabilities in Gaza, and conducting targeted operations against both armed groups and the civilians who aid them.

Given its history, and recent events, Israel would probably choose the latter—at great human and diplomatic cost. Israel is hated in Gaza more than ever, and the current ruling coalition in Israel is also extremely unlikely to make concessions to

the Palestinians or give them any meaningful autonomy.¹⁵ Although Netanyahu's position is more well-known, other Israeli leaders such as Bezalel Smotrich, the leader of the second largest coalition party in the government, deny the existence of the Palestinian people and advocate for a one-state solution in which Palestinians who do not wish to live in a "Jewish state" will be forced to emigrate.¹⁶ As a result, Israel's options to persuade ordinary Palestinians in Gaza not to resist the occupation, or to coopt Palestinian elites, are limited at best.

The lack of a realistic persuasive option leaves Israel most likely to emphasize coercion over persuasion. Such an approach would ignore the battle for legitimacy in favor of degrading Palestinian armed groups through military operations, controlling the population through an intelligence and law enforcement presence, and coopting Palestinian elites through targeted payoffs.¹⁷ Such an approach would probably be effective in keeping Hamas or a like-minded organization from exploiting a security vacuum and returning to power.

The costs to Israel, however, would be immense. Israel's troops in Gaza would be constantly exposed to attack or abduction and would probably be subject to at least a low tempo of violence, leading to a constant trickle of IDF casualties. Israel would also be forced to choose between allowing its military presence to degrade on its borders or keeping reservists mobilized to meet its military needs in Gaza. Also, if it appears that Hamas is near destruction, groups like the Lebanese Hezbollah might increase attacks beyond their current limited approach.¹⁸ Finally, Hamas is not likely to release Israeli hostages as long as the war continues at a high tempo, as the hostages are both human shields and bargaining chips for the group.

Palestinians in Gaza would also face significant harm. IDF operations targeting terrorists would expose them to collateral damage, and Israel has shown that it is willing to inflict significant civilian casualties in order to kill suspected terrorists.¹⁹ Roadblocks, business closures, and control over resources would worsen Gaza's economic plight. Overall, while Hamas itself might suffer tremendously, support for its resistance narrative would only grow.

These effects would also degrade Israel's international position and further reduce the already-remote chances of any peace. Israel's air and ground operations in Gaza have already led to international backlash, which gives an idea of how the world would respond to a prolonged Israeli occupation of Gaza. Protests have erupted across the world, several countries have recalled diplomats, opposition within the Biden administration is growing, and South Africa appealed to the International Criminal Court to rule on whether Israeli actions in Gaza amount to genocide.²⁰ Continued occupation would also make it far harder, perhaps impossible, for Israel to resume normalization with Saudi Arabia, and would otherwise strain relations with moderate Arab states.

Israel could seek to decrease those costs by moderating the level of repression it employs in Gaza, but striking a balance that meets its security needs while

mollifying those opposed to such an occupation would be extremely difficult. In any case, without political reform, an exit from Gaza without a resurgence of violence is unlikely. With this option, the best-case scenario for Israel is a perpetual occupation in which insurgent violence is kept at politically acceptable levels. The worst-case scenario is that Palestinian resistance morphs into an insurgency, dragging Israel into a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign while Palestinian extremists gain further support from around the world. In both cases, Israel's long-term actions in Gaza would fuel opposition to its occupation in Palestine from parts of the Israeli population and from the international community.

Without political reform, an exit from Gaza without a resurgence of violence is unlikely

Option Five: PA or Third-Party Stewardship

Governance of Gaza could also pass to a third party: the Palestinian Authority (PA) or an Arab state or coalition. Each of these choices entails different challenges for Israel, but also significant opportunities, particularly if the PA could be restored. A PA administration would bring uncertainty for Israel, given the PA's divergent interests and the power struggle that would probably erupt should the 88-year old Mahmoud Abbas die or leave power, but it is the Palestinian entity most likely to achieve international legitimacy. Passing responsibility to an Arab state or coalition would come at a major cost to Israel due to the concessions likely demanded of it during the ensuing negotiations, such as ensuring a path to Palestinian independence or taking action against Israeli settler groups.²¹ The emergence of such an Arab coalition is probably impossible in the short term due to political constraints both in Israel and in Arab capitals; Arab states have shown little willingness to play a peacekeeping role in Gaza, and they would not want to be seen as suppressing Palestinians at Israel's behest. However, passing governance to a third party with greater legitimacy than Israel would probably be the most effective way to govern Gaza in the long term.

If an acceptable third party effectively took over Gaza and was able to maintain control, it would probably offer the best resolution to the current conflict. This would dramatically reduce the human costs to Israel by reducing the need for military action in Gaza. Israel would maintain tight control over its borders with Gaza, and IDF personnel would not be exposed to the same dangers as they would be in Gaza itself after withdrawing. A third-party administration would also do significant harm to Hamas, albeit indirectly—if it succeeded. A third-party administration would deprive Hamas of the benefits it gains from governing Gaza: tax revenue, freedom of movement, productive

capacity, and other advantages that come with control over territory. It also minimizes the risk of a broader war by decreasing escalatory Israeli military activity in Gaza. With that decreased military activity comes an increased possibility of the release of Israeli hostages held by Hamas. Arab states would also welcome non-Israeli control of Gaza, enabling a resumption of US-Saudi normalization talks. Finally, it would lay the groundwork for renewed peace talks, as Israel would not occupy additional Palestinian territory, and any Palestinian political entity which resulted from the stewardship could be part of the negotiations.

However, this option is probably the most difficult to implement due to the delicate politics involved. Netanyahu has publicly stated that the PA will have no role in post-war Gaza, and while he may be willing to walk back such statements—and other leaders like Defense Minister Yoav Gallant have signaled more openness—his far-right coalition members will make it as difficult as they can.²² Any administration that comes to power with support from the IDF will also face an immediate deficit of legitimacy among Palestinians in Gaza. And in the longer term, any Palestinian administration will face conflicting demands as it tries to satisfy the desires of the Palestinians it governs and the Israeli government which will retain the threat to depose it.²³

Returning Gaza to PA rule would also create an uncertain situation, particularly in the coming five or so years. The PA is widely considered to be extremely corrupt, and any aid granted to the group runs the risk of ending up in a personal bank account.²⁴ The PA is also unpopular in Gaza, partly since it is seen as a collaborator with Israel because it works closely with Israeli security forces in the West Bank, and partly due to unfavorable views of Abbas.²⁵ Even more important is the looming succession crisis within Fatah, the PA, and the Palestine Liberation Organization. Abbas is old, unhealthy, and without a clear successor. He has also hollowed out the formal succession mechanisms of the PA and other Palestinian institutions, leading to the possibility that his death would lead to the rise of a leader who

Israel finds unacceptable, or unleash a violent power struggle within the PA or the broader Palestinian national movement.²⁶

Despite the advantages of passing the governance of Gaza to a third party, the likelihood of failure is high. Negotiations will be hard, and whoever governs Gaza will face similar problems as those faced by an Israeli military occupation. The failure of such an administration would create a security and political

vacuum which extremist groups would exploit, making this option the most likely, other than a complete Israeli withdrawal, to lead to the return to power of Hamas or a Hamas-like group in Gaza.

The likelihood of failure of passing governance of Gaza to a third party is high

Option Six: A Targeted Killing Campaign

Israel could also prioritize a campaign of targeting killings of Hamas leaders in its immediate neighborhood—or even farther afield.²⁷ Indeed, such a campaign appears to already be underway. On January 2, 2024, an Israeli drone strike in Beirut killed Saleh al-Arouri, the deputy chief of Hamas’ political bureau and an important liaison with the Lebanese Hezbollah.²⁸ It is unclear if al-Arouri had any direct involvement in the October 7 attack, so his assassination is an indication that Israel intends to follow its word to go after all Hamas leadership.²⁹ Several mid-level Hamas leaders have reportedly already been killed in the tunnels beneath Gaza.³⁰

Although it is impractical for Israel to individually target the thousands of Hamas fighters that streamed across its southern border on the morning of October 7—those fighters are already being engaged by the IDF in Gaza—Israel could pursue Hamas’ military and political leadership around the world for the next several years, regardless of what military or political path it takes in Gaza in the near term.³¹ For that reason, a targeted killing campaign is best understood not as an option on its own, but as complementary and occurring simultaneously to any one of the previous options, with the possible exception of an Arab country’s stewardship of Gaza.

Whether targeted killings will effectively degrade Hamas’ ability to plan and execute future attacks will depend on their scale and success. Isolated hits against high-profile Hamas leaders are likely to satisfy Israeli domestic opinion but will do little to curb future violence. Israel has assassinated terrorist leaders around the world in the past, and these rarely had a decisive strategic effect. Rather, history shows that Israel would need to sustain a campaign of consistent targeted killings of both senior Hamas leadership and their military operatives to reduce the number of future attacks. Israel undertook such an effort during the Second Intifada, when its targeted killing campaign decimated the leadership of Hamas, Fatah factions, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, hindering their effectiveness and ultimately helping bring an end to a wave of terrorist attacks.³² A similarly extensive killing campaign would disrupt Hamas’ day-to-day operations and hinder its overall functioning by forcing leaders to limit communications and otherwise hide to avoid being killed.

A targeted killing campaign would cost Israel little in lives relative to other kinetic options, but it would face greater challenges the broader its scope. Several Hamas leaders live in Qatar and Turkey, where Israel would need to use more sophisticated methods of assassination to reach their targets. Hits in these countries will be difficult to execute and may require months or years of intelligence collection and operational planning.

Botched or discovered assassinations (plausible deniability is near impossible given that Israel's campaign was publicly announced) are likely to severely damage Israeli diplomatic relations and may even drive regional escalation and create more diplomatic support for Hamas. Turkish President Erdogan warned that Israel would be "doomed to pay a heavy price" if it tried to assassinate members of Hamas in Turkey.³³ On January 2, 2024, Turkish officials arrested 34 people suspected of spying for Mossad.³⁴ Targeted killings may also disrupt, at least temporarily, any ongoing negotiations over Israeli hostages. It is also possible that Hamas or sympathetic groups might retaliate against Israeli officials, Israelis in general, or simply Jewish targets globally in response to high-profile assassinations.

In addition to potential escalation, targeted killings carry other strategic risks and limitations. First, a targeted killing that seems wise when it is executed may result in the rise of worse alternative leaders or other unforeseen consequences. For example, Israel's assassination of Hamas founder and leader Sheikh Yassin in 2004 removed all limits he had placed on the group's relationship with Iran.³⁵ Second, Hamas' victory in the 2006 election, years of governing Gaza, and the attack on October 7 itself are evidence that even seriously crippling Hamas during the Second Intifada through a campaign of targeted killings did not ultimately eliminate the threat posed to Israel by the group. While Israel seeks and may very well get revenge on many of those who orchestrated the October 7 attack, a targeted killing campaign alone does not guarantee long-term peace or security for Israel if the underlying driving forces of extremism and violence go unaddressed.

Difficult Tradeoffs

All of Israel's options are imperfect, so it must be prepared to accept tradeoffs in its approach to Gaza. The sharpest of these tradeoffs involve Israel's ability to implement each option, the damage each option will do to Hamas, and the accompanying costs. For example, returning to a version of the status quo ante is doable, but Hamas would remain in power in Gaza.

Perhaps the most immediate tradeoff is that the options Israel is most able to implement unilaterally are those that come with the greatest costs. Israel can increase the odds of degrading Hamas by continuing its military campaign in Gaza and remaining involved in the day-to-day management of the territory. However, doing so raises the long-term human and diplomatic costs for Israel. In addition, Israel is likely to have more success in the short term if it maintains a high operational tempo, but this would further increase political sympathy for Hamas, possibly for the long term as well as in the immediate future. Passing the responsibility on to the international community or the

PA, on the other hand, would involve far fewer day-to-day casualties for Israel, but international forces are unlikely to suppress Hamas effectively or administer Gaza successfully—even if the hard negotiations to permit their use succeed.

Another tradeoff is the relationship between harm to Hamas and Israel's other interests. The options that will do the most damage to Hamas are also those that come with greater diplomatic costs, more Israeli casualties, and increased risk of regional war. Israel can inflict the most damage if it is willing to endure a long occupation of Gaza, attack Hamas leaders around the world wherever they are found, and continue aggressive military operations, even at the price of high civilian casualties. Yet such an aggressive approach has numerous costs. Assassination attempts in countries like Qatar and Turkey might spark a diplomatic crisis, a long-lasting occupation would increase the financial burden on Israel and result in regular casualties, and continued aggressive military operations would further alienate world opinion, including in the US.

Continued operations to degrade Hamas also keep the risk of a broader conflict high. Groups like Hezbollah and the Houthis are more likely to continue their involvement in order to show solidarity with Hamas, and this could easily escalate. In Iraq, Syria, and other countries, US forces may be the targets of Iranian-backed groups which also seek to show solidarity with Hamas.

The options Israel is most able to implement unilaterally come with the greatest costs

No Good Choices

In the end, Israel should recognize that a long-term occupation will be too costly and that it should ensure its security through better defenses, an assassination campaign, and regular military raids that are part of a “shoot-and-scoot” approach. At the same time, it should do what it can to try to bolster a PA presence in Gaza (something the United States should actively support) and strengthen moderate Palestinian voices, even as it avoids relying on them for day-to-day security in the near term. Doing so is politically unsatisfying and even risky, but it is the most sustainable way to prevent another October 7. As Israel pursues this approach, it should remain open to a credible Palestinian partner, perhaps backed by an international coalition, to take over administration and security provision in Gaza. Although this option is not currently viable, it remains the option with the highest upside.

What Israel should not do is attempt a long-term military occupation of Gaza. An occupation would drain Israel of the diplomatic, financial and human capital it needs to maintain its security. While an occupation might prove popular among the Israeli right, it would ultimately be counterproductive.

Israeli leaders must make difficult choices, and in so doing they need to manage domestic political expectations. Understandably, Israelis want to ensure that Hamas or another group can never again threaten an attack like

Israeli leaders need to recognize the necessity of a PA role, despite its many weaknesses

that of October 7. Yet, such an ambitious goal will be difficult to achieve. Perhaps more importantly, it will need to be a constant focus for the Israeli military and intelligence community for years to come rather than a discrete operation that Israel can complete and then move on from. Politically, Israeli leaders need to recognize the necessity of a PA role, despite its many weaknesses.

The current government appears inclined to avoid making the necessary choices. It has focused on short-term military decisions rather than long-term political ones. Where longer-term options have been discussed, the Israeli government has mostly confined itself to statements of what it will not do. This posture is not sustainable. The current phase of military operations will come to an end, and Israel must be prepared to win the peace as well as the war. This is especially true if Hamas survives in some form, which seems highly likely.

For Israel, the key lies in balancing its security needs against the humanitarian and political realities of the Gaza Strip and recognizing that both these realities will change—often not in Israel’s favor—as the months go on. The decisions made in this context will not only influence the immediate future of Israel-Gaza relations, but will also have profound implications for any broader Middle East peace processes—from the continuation of Israel’s diplomatic normalization with regional states to any hypothetical negotiations over the future of Palestine. The potential repercussions of these strategies extend far beyond the confines of Gaza, affecting regional stability and international relations writ large.

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