

# Guest Opinion: The war in Gaza as an opportunity to finally break the bonds that tie it to Israel



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Photo courtesy Eric Mandel

*Guest Opinion by Lt. Col. (Ret.) Avi Shalev, translated by Dr. Col. (Ret.) Eran Lerman*

What is the Day After for Gaza?

To begin to answer that question, MEPIN is pleased to share a new and unpublished comprehensive analysis of The War in Gaza, with Israel's options, written by Lt. Col. (Ret.) Avi Shalev. Mr. Shalev is an expert in Palestinian issues, having served 24 years in the IDF Intelligence Division and Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza. The article was translated from Hebrew by Col. (res.) Eran Lerman, Vice President of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS). Dr. Lerman was deputy foreign policy and international affairs director at the National Security Council in the Israeli Prime Minister's Office. He held senior posts in IDF Military Intelligence for over 20 years. Please read Lt. Col. Shalev's piece here:

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Lt. Col. (Ret.) Avi Shalev

As the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) pursues its aims in Gaza – seeking to bring down the Hamas regime, destroy its military capabilities, retrieve the hostages, and make life secure for the border communities – the scope of the devastation in the Strip makes it all the more necessary to define coherent policy purposes for the day after those aims are achieved. In other words, the immediate goals of the war need to be part of a broader strategy, one that would enable local, regional, and international players to advance solutions in sync with Israel’s own aspirations and interests. The need to propose a manifest political end state is becoming more evident day by day: without it, Israel faces a governmental vacuum and explosive chaos. The time has come to present an answer to the question of who would take over in the Gaza Strip once the war is over and what would be Israel’s best exit strategy.

### **The Roots of the Failure**

The Hamas onslaught smashed the hopes of the Israeli defense establishment of sustaining the Gaza Strip as a secondary, contained, and dormant front. Yet, in a more profound sense, it exposed the failure of the 2005 disengagement project. The latter was meant to cut off the interaction between Israel and Gaza to concentrate on military and civic challenges elsewhere: it involved the total evacuation of Israeli military and civilian presence in the Strip, maintaining a degree of economic dependence. Shortly afterward, however, Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary elections in January 2006 and then violently took over the Gaza Strip in a coup in July 2007.

Israel responded to this takeover with an inconsistent and self-contradictory policy, both military and civic, establishing the grounds for the utter failure of 7 October 2023 and the worst trauma in Israel’s history. In effect, since 2007, Israel has applied two conflicting concepts to the continuation of Hamas’ rule in Gaza. The IDF took offensive actions against Hamas but did not seek a decisive military outcome. At the civilian level, Israel began to apply a policy of limiting economic relations with Gaza, which translated to minimum traffic allowed to cross via the crossing points while providing elementary humanitarian solutions for the Gazan population. A complete blockade was enforced at sea except for limited fishing activity.

The rationale for this policy was framed in terms of “distinguishing” between the Palestinian Authority (PA) controlled territories in the West Bank, which remained committed to a negotiated process with Israel, and the hostile Hamas-controlled Gazan territory. Yet in recent years, despite the stated rationale, both military and civilian policy towards Gaza changed: the

purpose was to weaken the PA while allowing Hamas rule in Gaza to become a counterweight to Abu Mazen's governance. Trade was expanded, some 20 thousand Gazan workers were allowed into Israel daily, internationally funded infrastructure projects were facilitated, and Qatari money flowed in.

Still, the Gaza population remained caught between two contradictory imperatives. On one hand, Israeli policy continued to reflect the arrangements made under the Oslo Agreements (the Paris Protocol), which made Gaza part of Israel's customs "envelope" so that it could not independently trade with Egypt or the rest of the world. On the other hand, security considerations led to a separation from Israel, leaving Gaza isolated economically. Thus:

1. A typical Gaza resident is barred – except for a fortunate few – from entering Israel legally or crossing over to the West Bank.
2. The Kerem Shalom crossing allowed only restricted traffic under strict Israeli supervision. A range of goods was barred from entering, and only negligible amounts of controlled exports from the Strip were allowed to leave.
3. The Egyptian-controlled Rafah Crossing restricted traffic to people only, not goods (with the occasional exception of humanitarian aid) and small numbers (about a thousand a day), while the crossing was often closed (reflecting the Egyptian government's general aversion towards Gaza). The Gaza port and airport were disabled, while two other crossings with Israel were shut for security reasons.

For the average Gazan, all this meant that Israel retained remote control of his life – even after the disengagement in 2005. The Israeli role came to be seen as a more sophisticated version of the occupation, and Hamas' narrative about a "siege" seemed to be borne out in the Gazans' daily lives. The population blamed their economic distress on Israel's policy of restricted traffic. At the same time, the Israeli economy grew apace, and Gazans believed that they were being denied the hope of earning a decent living.

Entrepreneurs, farmers, merchants, and industrialists all encountered -each in his own realm – an impossible reality of restrictions on their freedom of movement, which weighed down on them and fed the flames of anger and hate towards Israel. Meanwhile, in the field of healthcare, what the Gazans portray is an unreasonable bureaucratic nightmare that harmed Gazans who need treatment in Israel, in the PA areas, or in Jordan. As to water, electricity, and communications infrastructure, supply was occasionally limited, which led to shortages and enhanced the perception amongst the Gazans that Israel was determined to deny them a normal life.

These practical irritants were added to deeply ingrained and historically grounded hostility towards Israel, as well as nationalist, religious, and cultural considerations. Together, these factors created personal experiences of deprivation, frustration, and hate. The famous eulogy of then Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan (30 April 1956) – in which he mourned a young Israeli pioneer of Kibbutz Nahal-Oz murdered in a border raid and warned that "we must not flinch from looking in the eye the hatred nurtured by hundreds of thousands" – is as valid now as it was then.

The failure to predict the actual eruption was fed to some extent by the self-inflicted illusion, purveyed by Israeli propagandists, that Gaza is no longer attached to Israel.

### **The Tools of Hamas Social and Economic Control**

Gaza remained tethered to the Israeli economy, and unlike other narratives of victimhood, this one cannot be easily dismissed. Due to the post-2006 reality in Gaza, and particularly to Israeli restrictions, Hamas created a “tunnel economy” based on the smuggling of various goods, as well as arms, from Egypt. This “industry” fabulously enriched Hamas and led to the economic rise of clans associated with it and the emergence of new socio-economic classes and a web of interests that buttressed Hamas’s rule. The latter took care to pamper this new elite, which replaced the PA-sponsored one and expected these new power players, immensely enriched, to support its rule and secure its future. The tunnel economy symbolized resistance to the status quo and proved that only subversive action could deliver long-term results for the Gazans.

The Qatari effort to bolster Hamas rule made possible with Israeli cooperation, enabled the movement to link up with widening social and economic circles. With Israel’s enthusiastic backing, Qatar promoted large-scale housing complexes and infrastructure projects, which tightened Hamas’ grip on local society. The almost incessant flow of dollars, tens of millions a month, at times brought in suitcases full of cash through the Erez Crossing, was paid out to tens of thousands of junior officials, workers, and the needy, enhancing social cohesion around Hamas.

Thus, 18 years after Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary elections and nearly 17 years since they violently took over the Gaza Strip, all civic, political, and economic functions in the Gaza Strip became dependent upon Hamas. Hamas became the beating heart of the Gazan social system, gained a positive political aura, and could actively threaten to overthrow the PA in the West Bank. This position was reflected in opinion polls, in the manner in which Hamas came to control the Palestinian public agenda, and is now echoed in wider circles worldwide.

The growing strength of Hamas in Gaza impacted the political and social dynamics in the West Bank, feeding radicalization, hostility, and friction with Israel. Its narrative of “resistance” gained support versus the PA-associated notion of a negotiated outcome. Most powerfully, it could link its doctrines to what they described as the brutal socio-economic reality imposed by Israel after the disengagement – which tallied with the population’s own perception of what hampered their daily lives.

### **Israel needs to Reconsider its Assumptions about Gaza**

Some Palestinian grievances are the result of complex objective realities, such as security needs and other constraints, but Israeli attempts to explain these falls on deaf ears given the longstanding relationship of mutual mistrust. Even if Israel bears only indirect responsibility for the misfortunes of Gaza, and the systemic failures in the Strip are due to the corrupt, violent-extremist, and inept conduct of quarreling Palestinian political factions, the Gazans continue to see Israel as the ultimate source of their woes; some of them even harbor the suspicion that Israel deliberately put Hamas where it is now so as to have an excuse for military action.



The status quo that existed until the present conflict mainly served Hamas' interests. The current strife enabled Hamas to diminish the impact of Israel's normalization with much of the Arab World (Egypt, Jordan, the Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco) and reduce the prospects of further normalizations and peace in the region. By now, it also has begun to undermine Israel's standing in the West while locking Israel into a perpetual, pointless bloodbath.

The false assumption that the disengagement in 2005 actually disengaged the Gaza Strip from Israel thus came at a high cost. It put to sleep the country and its guardians, who should have rung the bells of alarm against Hamas' real intentions. The illusion was bolstered by the completion of the physical barrier, above the ground and below it, giving the false impression that Gaza is now truly cut off from Israel – one of the cornerstones of the conceptual framework that collapsed on 7 October 2023. Israel now faces the urgent need to replace what was the military and political status quo with a more bearable and durable reality.

Indeed, the presumed blockade of the Gaza Strip was also little more than an optical illusion. By omission or commission, the Egyptians failed to prevent the flow of arms originating in China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran. These arms and technologies, brought in from Egypt, enabled Hamas to build its impressive fortifications and underground infrastructure system. Israel could not coerce Egypt into blocking this flow in the absence of any effective monitoring of the so-called "Philadelphi Corridor" along the Gaza-Egyptian border. This made it possible for Hamas to prepare for its war with Israel.

At the same time, the easing of restrictions on entry into Israel was used by Hamas to gather detailed intelligence for its operations in Israel. The pre-war pattern thus served Hamas at both ends: it allowed it to depict a brutal Israeli "siege" while actually exploiting the status quo's wide-open loopholes. The time has come for the assumptions that had made this possible to be thoroughly re-examined.

### **Israel's Policy Paper Points in the Wrong Direction**

It will not be easy to establish a coherent policy to replace the present failed one, particularly amidst public turmoil over the question of humanitarian supplies. Israelis find it difficult to understand what the world demands from them concerning humanitarian solutions, while the shadow of the horrors of 7 October still lingers, the fighting goes on, and the hostage situation is yet unresolved. This difficulty in understanding world opinion, fed by unbalanced Israeli media reporting, ignores the question of responsibility for the humanitarian crisis and is viewed in the world as a watershed event with a bearing on Israel's basic legitimacy. Politics, moreover, are at play on both sides of the water; without a workable vision for resolving the civilian situation in Gaza, Israel puts at risk a core aspect of its special relationship with America.

In response to American and international pressures, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu published a short list of principles for the achievement of Israel's goals (for the paper and the growing rift with the US, see [HERE](#)). Among the position paper's critical determinations are a "southern closure" along the Egypt-Gaza border, in cooperation with Egypt and with US support; the control of all approaches to Gaza; and the management of civic affairs and public order within Gaza by "experienced local elements not identified with terror." What this would mean in

practice is that Israel's involvement – and responsibility for the misery in Gaza – would increase, and the dependence that marked the civic relationship before the war would be perpetuated and deepened. The proposal:

**1.** Ignores the immense complexity of the challenge of governance in Gaza amidst what could quickly become a humanitarian disaster this would imply (see the early warning on these pages, back in October 2023, [HERE](#) ).

**2.** It hinges on finding local players willing to replace Hamas and shoulder the management of the crisis—an unlikely prospect without a plan broadly supported internationally and acceptable to the Palestinian population. If local elements do show up, as things stand, they are likely to be fronting for Hamas (who are already looking for other parties to share the burden with them) or violently opposed by those who favor Hamas' return.

**3.** Fails to cut the Gordian knot, which still ties Israel to Gaza and renders Israel responsible for the humanitarian conditions there – enabling a Hamas successor to blame Israel, focus on the continuation of military action, and avoid the blame for what befell the population.

The Israeli public and its leaders have yet to fully internalize the meaning of the civilian burden at their doorstep: to start with, providing energy (fuel, gas, electricity), water, food, goods, and means of communication for two million people, and also providing those people with some measure of freedom. Otherwise, it will continue the present situation, which positions Israel in the eyes of many in the world as an oppressor and Gaza as an “open-air prison” – and the government paper offers no way out of this predicament.

However, the war does offer Israel a rare opportunity to bring about a systemic change, reducing Gaza's corrosive dependence and, at the same time, providing for Israeli security and preventing Hamas from rebuilding its military capabilities. Israel should put forward an initiative that would lift the blockade and end the “bear hug” of Gaza in return for far-reaching new arrangements to be agreed with Israel's allies:

**1.** A “Marshall Plan” for the reconstruction of Gaza would re-order civilian priorities, rebuild, and offer the Gazans new economic horizons under multinational supervision, replacing Israeli economic controls.

**2.** Israel's economic relations with Gaza would be phased out over three years. This would require modifying the Paris Agreement to let the Palestinians take charge of their own destiny and collect taxes in the crossings independently and under multinational controls. The donor nations would work to create vital water, energy, communications, and other services that will replace the relationship with Israel at the end of this short three-year period.

**3.** As an alternative to the interface with Israel, at the end of the three years, the Rafah crossing, the Dahaniyyah Airport, and the Gaza Port would replace the present use of Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings. The civilian supervision regime would institute a corridor to a single European port (Cyprus?) where all goods would be inspected to prevent weapons smuggling. At Dahaniyyah and Rafah, there would be a special inspection regime carried out by a task force

modeled on the EU mission – EUBAM – which operated until the Hamas takeover in 2007. Israel would have an agreed role governed by detailed protocols in these inspection regimes.

**4.** Israel and Egypt would work together with the relevant multinational bodies to create a “special control zone” on the Egypt-Gaza border to prevent the revival of the tunnel economy and the smuggling of banned goods from (and into) Sinai.

**5.** The natural gas resources of the Gaza Strip (the Gaza Marine project) could be developed subject to the maintenance of peace and stability and the discretion of the supervisory bodies.

Now is the time to put an end to the Gazans’ destructive cycle of dependence on Israel and Israel’s world image as an unjust, occupying force. This would require re-negotiating the existing customs framework and establishing a new economic regime governed by the donor nations. It would involve a gradual transition, given the present situation in which Gaza cannot survive in isolation from Israel. It may generate new security risks, which must be assumed no matter what final dispensation is reached. But it would restore Israel’s legitimacy, relieve it from an unbearable burden, and force the Palestinians to replace Hamas’ narrative of victimhood (and “resistance”) with a reality of responsibility and opportunity.