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Middle East

# Two Gaza Scenarios: Greater Israel vs. Oslo

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### **A ground invasion appears imminent, but what is the political endgame?**

Announced as imminent several days ago, after over 1 million inhabitants of the northern half of the Gaza Strip were given only 24 hours to flee south, the Israeli armed forces' land onslaught on Gaza is yet to start at the time of writing. Despite attempts to convey a contrary impression, this delay reflects the fact that Israel's political leadership and military command had no oven-ready plan for the invasion of Gaza on the scale they have been contemplating since the assault launched by Hamas on Oct. 7.

The Israeli armed forces could hardly have been anticipating a reoccupation of Gaza, which they evacuated 18 years ago. The successive operations they launched against the strip in 2006, 2008-09, 2012, 2014 and 2021 — to mention only the largest ones — have all been limited, essentially consisting of bombing, along with limited ground assaults in 2009 and 2014. But the extraordinary scale and traumatizing effect of Oct. 7 made it impossible for Israel's leaders to set a lesser goal than the total eradication of Hamas from Gaza and the "pacification" of the strip.

This is a formidable challenge, for not only does the invasion of such a densely populated territory involve urban warfare of a kind that is highly risky for the assailant, but it poses most acutely the problem of what to do with the conquered territory the day after. The issue is not only military, needless to say; it is also, even primarily, political. The tight interdependency of political and military considerations is especially clear in the present situation. The scale of violence that is unavoidable in the pursuit of Israel's proclaimed goals will inevitably provoke a political fallout, which will impact the conduct of the war itself.

The most obvious factor in the equation is that Israel's tolerance for losses among its troops is very limited, as illustrated most spectacularly by the exchange in 2011 of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, held captive in Gaza, for over 1,000 Palestinian prisoners. This makes it impossible for the Israeli army to launch ground assaults under conditions that impose a heavy cost in soldiers' lives, like the assaults that Russian troops (regular ones and/or those affiliated with the Wagner paramilitary service) have been launching in Ukraine since 2022 — not to mention extreme cases like Iran's "human waves" during its 1980-88 war with Iraq.

Thus, the Israeli army's superiority is at its maximum in terrains such as Egypt's Sinai desert or the Syrian Golan Heights, where buildings are scarce and firepower from a distance is decisive. Conversely, when Ariel Sharon, Israel's minister of defense at the time, ordered his troops to enter besieged Beirut in early August 1982, they had to abandon the attempt the next day. It was only after the negotiated evacuation of Palestinian fighters from Beirut that Israeli forces managed to storm the city in mid-September. They withdrew by the end of the same month after a nascent Lebanese urban resistance movement started targeting them.

A corollary of this is that the only way for Israel's army to invade any part of so dense and vast an urban landscape as the Gaza Strip with minimal Israeli losses is to flatten the areas that it strives to occupy by way of intensive bombing before launching the ground offensive. This is indeed what started in the immediate aftermath of Oct. 7, with a level of damage that, in both extent and intensity, goes way beyond prior Israeli bombing campaigns, from Lebanon in 2006 to the successive wars on Gaza. Flattening vast swaths of urban territory was not possible for the Israeli military in any of the previous wars — not for lack of destructive power, of course, but for the absence of the necessary political conditions.

This was most obvious in 1982, when the Israeli siege of Beirut provoked a major international outcry and political crisis inside Israel itself, where the opposition to the Likud government of Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon came

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out in massive protests. In the previous wars against Gaza, Israel's armed forces had no intention of reoccupying part of Gaza anyway. This time around, this intention is on clear display, and the shockwaves from the unprecedented killing of huge numbers of Israeli civilians as well as soldiers are of such a magnitude that both the Israeli public and Israel's traditional international backers are explicitly or implicitly approving the reoccupation of Gaza in its entirety. What can the eradication of Hamas and the analogy with the Islamic State group mean, short of conducting a search and sweep operation in the whole of the strip?

As the Financial Times recently reported, based on interviews with military experts:

Israel's army will deploy its so-called "doctrine of victory", which requires the air force to have a deep bank of pre-vetted targets destroyed in rapid order. It is already in play, with fighter jets intensely bombing large swaths of Gaza, pausing only to refuel, often in mid-air. The campaign is meant to outpace the ability of Hamas to regroup and, according to a person familiar with the discussions that created the 2020 doctrine, to "achieve maximum goals before the international community puts political pressure to slow down".

This is the military scenario that is brewing. Now comes the political dimension. If the military goal is indeed to reoccupy Gaza in order to eradicate Hamas, the next questions, naturally, are: For how long, and to replace Hamas with what? There is much more room for disagreement on these two questions of political strategy than on the military strategy, whose parameters are much narrower since they depend on objective considerations and the nature of the military means at hand. The two opposite poles of the political divergence translate into two scenarios that we might call the Greater Israel scenario and the Oslo scenario.

The Greater Israel scenario is the one that appeals most to Benjamin Netanyahu and his acolytes on Israel's far right. The Likud Party is heir to the Zionist far right, known as Revisionist Zionism, whose armed offshoots perpetrated the Deir Yassin massacre, the most infamous mass murder of Palestinians in 1948, amid what the Arabs call the Nakba (catastrophe). On the 78% of the territory of British Mandate Palestine that Zionist armed forces managed to conquer during the war of that year (the Zionists had been granted 55% by the partition plan approved by a nascent United Nations Organization, then dominated by countries of the Global North), 80% of the Palestinian population were uprooted. They had fled the war, frightened by atrocities such as Deir Yassin, and were never to be allowed to return to their homes and land. And yet the Zionist far right never forgave mainstream Zionism, which was then led by David Ben-Gurion, for having agreed to stop the war before conquering 100% of British Mandate Palestine between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.

During his recent speech at the U.N. General Assembly in New York, only two weeks before Oct. 7, Netanyahu brandished a map of the Middle East showing a Greater Israel that included Gaza and the West Bank. Even more relevant to the new Gaza war is the fact — hardly mentioned in the global media — that Netanyahu had resigned from the Israeli cabinet led by Sharon in 2005 in protest against the latter's decision to withdraw from Gaza. (Sharon had succeeded Netanyahu as the head of Likud in 1999, following the latter's electoral defeat to the Labor Party then led by Ehud Barak. Sharon then managed to win the next election, in 2003, and offered the ministry of finance to Netanyahu.)

Much more an army man than a politician, Sharon was attentive to the military's plea for a withdrawal of troops from the unruly Gaza, with a preference for controlling the strip from outside. He saw no prospect for an annexation of Gaza similar to what has been occurring in the West Bank since its occupation in 1967. He therefore judged that it would be wiser to let the Palestinian Authority, established by the 1993 Oslo Accords, take care of Gaza, while focusing on the West Bank — a much more prized and consensual Zionist goal.

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Oslo required the withdrawal of Israeli troops only from those West Bank areas densely populated by Palestinians, while allowing Israel to maintain control of most of the territory. To show his contempt for the Palestinian Authority, Sharon opted for a unilateral “disengagement” from Gaza in 2005 — without preparing it with the Palestinian Authority, that is. Two years later, Hamas seized power in the strip.

Netanyahu protested Sharon’s disengagement. He led the opposition to Sharon within Likud and gathered enough force to incite him to quit the party and found a new one that same year, 2005. Netanyahu has led Likud ever since. He maneuvered his way to the prime ministership in 2009 by playing on the fragmentation of the Israeli political scene — an art at which, as the consummate opportunist, he excels — and remained in office until June 2021. By the end of 2022, he was back at the helm, heading the most far-right government in Israel’s history — a country where several successive governments since Likud’s first victory in 1977 have been labeled the “most right-wing in history” in an unending drift to the right. Netanyahu nodded to Donald Trump’s (and Jared Kushner’s) “peace plan” in 2020 only because he knew full well that the Palestinians could not accept it. He likely saw this inevitable rejection as a good pretext for a unilateral annexation of most of the West Bank at some later point.

The prospect of reconquering Gaza required a major upheaval that was not on the horizon. No one could have expected that it would be created, all of a sudden, by Hamas’ “Al-Aqsa Flood” operation. It was indeed the Israeli equivalent of 9/11. Oct. 7 was in fact 20 times more deadly than 9/11 relative to each country’s population, as Netanyahu pointed out to Joe Biden during the latter’s visit to Israel on Oct. 18. Just as 9/11 created the political conditions that allowed the Bush administration to realize its pet project of invading Iraq, Israel’s Oct. 7 created the political conditions for Gaza’s reconquest, something that Netanyahu had long desired but that was too wild and out of bounds to be openly discussed up to that point. Whether this goal is attainable remains to be seen, of course, but it is what the Zionist hard right aspires to.

The repeated calls by Israel’s political and military authorities to Gaza’s inhabitants to flee southward toward the border with Egypt, and their eagerness to convince Cairo to open the door to the Sinai Peninsula and take in the bulk of Gaza’s population (2.3 million people), are thus rightly understood by the Egyptians as an invitation to let the Gazans settle in Sinai for the indefinite future — just as the Palestinians displaced from their land in 1948 and 1967 have been turned into permanent refugees in neighboring Arab countries. On Oct. 18, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi poured cold water on this idea, cunningly advising Israel to give refuge to the Gazans in the Negev desert, within its own 1948 territory, if it is truly seeking to grant them only temporary shelter.

Greater Israel is not a unanimous ambition of Israel’s leaders, however — not even after Oct. 7. It has some support in the United States, from the far right of the Republican Party and among Christian Zionists. But it is certainly not supported by the bulk of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, the Democrats in particular. The Biden administration — well known to have little sympathy for Netanyahu, who in 2012 openly backed Mitt Romney for president against Barack Obama (and Biden, his vice president) — sticks to the prospect, created by the Oslo Accords, of a Palestinian rump state, providing an alibi to sideline the Palestinian cause and clear the way for the development of links and collaboration between Israel and the Arab states.

This is why Biden told CBS on Oct. 15 that “it would be a big mistake” for Israel to occupy Gaza. The U.S. president did not mean that the invasion of the entire strip in order to eradicate Hamas would be a mistake. On the contrary, he clearly stated that, “Going in but taking out the extremists ... is a necessary requirement.” Asked then “Do you believe that Hamas must be eliminated entirely?” Biden replied:

Yes, I do. But there needs to be a Palestinian authority. There needs to be a path to a Palestinian state. That path, called “the two state solution,” has been U.S. policy for decades. It would create an independent nation next to Israel for 5 million Palestinians who live in Gaza and on the West Bank of the Jordan River.

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The purpose of Biden's daylong visit to Israel was not only to enhance his political profile for the 2024 presidential election, ensuring that Trump, right-wing Republicans and evangelical Christian Zionists can't outflank him in their military support for Israel. (Note that in so doing, Biden is going against the views of a majority of U.S. citizens, and especially the majority of Democrats, who favor a more balanced approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.) Nor was Biden's purpose only to negotiate a token humanitarian gesture in order to pretend that his administration is doing all it can to alleviate the unfolding disaster. His purpose was also, and perhaps primarily, to convince the Israeli polity — with or without Netanyahu — of the necessity of sticking to the Oslo perspective. He aimed to boost this endeavor by meeting with Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Palestinian Authority, and with the king of Jordan. But the destruction of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital on the eve of his visit thwarted his plan.

The clearest indication yet that part of the Israeli military-political establishment sees eye to eye with the Biden administration has been provided by Ehud Barak, former chief of the general staff of the Israeli armed forces and former prime minister. He fine-tuned the Oslo scenario in an interview with *The Economist*:

Mr Barak believes that the optimal outcome, once Hamas's military capabilities have been sufficiently degraded, is the re-establishment of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza. ... However he warns that Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, "cannot be seen to be returning on Israeli bayonets". There will, therefore, need to be an interim period during which "Israel will capitulate to international pressure and hand Gaza over to an Arab peacekeeping force, which could include members such as Egypt, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates. They would secure the area until the Palestinian Authority could take control."

The fact that the Oslo process stalled shortly after being launched with great pomp and circumstance in 1993 — which led to the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000, followed by Israel's temporary reoccupation of those parts of the West Bank that it had evacuated in favor of the Palestinian Authority — does not seem to deter Washington and its allies from regarding it as the only feasible settlement. They probably believe that some sort of territorial swap like the one that was envisaged in the Trump-Kushner "peace plan" might eventually square the circle of reconciling the annexation of the West Bank areas where settlements have been proliferating with granting the Palestinians a fragmented "independent state" on 22% of their ancestral land west of the Jordan River.

Ultimately, the two scenarios — Greater Israel and Oslo — are predicated on Israel's ability to destroy Hamas to a degree sufficient to prevent it from controlling Gaza. This entails the conquest of most of the strip, if not all of it, by Israel's armed forces — a goal they could only achieve by destroying most of Gaza, which would come at an enormous human cost.

The *Washington Post* recently quoted Bruce Hoffman, a counterterrorism expert and professor at Georgetown University, who pointed to the eradication of the Tamil Tigers in the northern part of Sri Lanka as the only type of success achievable in such endeavors. The Tigers were wiped out in 2009 after a military offensive by Sri Lanka's armed forces that involved the killing of up to 40,000 civilians, according to U.N. estimates. "God forbid that that sort of carnage unfolds today," Hoffman told the *Post*. "But, if you're determined to destroy a terrorist organization, you can. There's a ruthlessness that goes with it."

Except that the world's attention is incomparably more focused on what happens in the Middle East than it was on what happened in Sri Lanka. The question therefore becomes what the Israeli army can achieve before a combination of losses in personnel and international pressure forces it to stop, not to mention the possibility of a regional conflagration involving Lebanon's Hezbollah, with Iran backing it. So it is by no means certain that either of the two scenarios will materialize. Israel's military has cautiously drafted a minimal plan consisting of creating a new extended buffer zone inside Gaza all along its borders, further aggravating the strip's condition as an "open-air prison."

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The only thing that is certain is that Israel's new onslaught on Gaza is already deadlier and more destructive than all previous episodes in the tragic 75-year history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It's also certain that this is going to get exponentially worse, which will only add to the destabilization of what is already the most unstable region of the world, and which plays a major role in destabilizing the Global North itself — with waves of refugees and the spillover of violence. Yet again, the shortsightedness and double standards of the United States and its European allies are going to blow back in their faces — this time with even more tragic consequences.

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