

What's Netanyahu's plan for post-conflict Gaza?

Does it rule out a workable cease-fire?



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (L) meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a military headquarters in Tel Aviv, on November 3, 2023.
● AMOS BEN GERSHOM/GPO



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INTERVIEW

Joe Biden has been promising that a deal for a cease-fire is very close to agreement, but at the same time, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has revealed his vision for Gaza once the fighting stops, which appears to rule out Palestinian sovereignty on the strip. The Conversation spoke with John Strawson, a Middle East expert at the University of East London, who has been researching and publishing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for several decades.

THE CONVERSATION: After weeks of wrangling, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu published his vision for a post-conflict Gaza. How compatible is it with the idea of a two-state solution? To what extent is his tough line influenced by the more hawkish members of his cabinet who take a hardline attitude to Palestinian sovereignty?

JOHN STRAWSON: Netanyahu's plan for a post-war Gaza is simply not practical and does not rise to the political challenges of the times. It is based on two principles: Israeli security control over Gaza and a civil administration run by non-Hamas officials.

However, there has been Israeli security control over Gaza in one form since 1967, and it has not brought security for either Israel or Palestinians. There is no reason to think that the Israel Defense Forces can do better now, especially after this catastrophic war. At the same time, it is difficult to see where the non-Hamas Palestinian officials will come from. Hamas has had a tight grip on Gaza since 2007, and anyone with any experience in administration is likely to be a member of Hamas, a sympathiser, or someone used to working with Hamas.

While there is opposition to Hamas in the Gaza Strip, there is little organised political opposition that could replace them. Like the US and Britain in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, when they banned officials from the Ba'athist party from the administration, chaos will follow. The only realistic option is to extend the power of the Palestinian Authority — presently based in Ramallah — into Gaza. But Netanyahu and his far-right allies think it will advance pressure for a two-state solution — something they are opposed to.

To what extent is this a starting point for Netanyahu? Has he left himself the political space to manoeuvre, given the pressure from the US and other international allies?

The plan was provided mainly due to international pressure — especially by the Americans. It should be noted that the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has been raising the issue of post-conflict Gaza with the Israelis since November, and it still took months to produce this flimsy document.

This gives us an insight into how difficult it is in practice for the US administration to use its apparent power over the Israeli cabinet. Netanyahu has much experience in dealing with American politicians and plays the system very well. He knows that Biden needs a calmer Middle East as a background to his re-election bid in November. As a result, the bargaining relationship is quite complex.



Netanyahu clearly thinks he has time on his side. The nearer it gets to the US election the more difficult it gets for Biden to please the progressive Democrats who want a cease-fire and the more traditional Democrats who have Israel's back. What Netanyahu is doing is the minimum in the hope of hanging on, hoping for a Trump win.

Does Netanyahu's vision reflect the feelings of the Jewish community in Israel? What about Arab voters? The prime minister appears deeply unpopular among most voter groups. Is his intransigence more about maintaining his hold on power than about seeking a workable long-term solution?

While Netanyahu is deeply unpopular with all sections of the Israeli public, we have to be careful in reading the public mood on policies for a post-war dispensation. Polling suggests that support for a two-state solution is declining. Israelis have been so traumatised by October 7 that there is little support for Palestinian empowerment.

To some extent, this is the result of the way that the Israelis view their country's disengagement from Gaza in 2005. It is often presented as an example of what happens when Israel ceases to occupy Palestinian land. In this account, Israel leaves Gaza, and Gaza becomes an armed encampment with the aim of destroying Israel — and indeed this remains Hamas's policy, despite the group releasing an amended charter in 2017.

But the 2005 disengagement, which included dismantling all Israeli settlements in the strip, was not the result of negotiations, but a unilateral act. The then-prime minister Ariel Sharon did not want to hand over power to the elected Palestinian Authority, thinking it would boost the PA's for statehood. Instead, Israel just left — and that allowed Hamas, the major political force in Gaza, to claim that Israel has "retreated under fire". Hamas then capitalised on the situation and went on to win the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006.

The lesson of this is that Israel needs proper negotiations that can lead to a sustainable future — and that can only mean a Palestinian state alongside Israel. That is not merely right for the Palestinians but essential in any plan to defeat Hamas. It's not only a military operation but a political one, and Palestinians need to be offered a peaceful and just alternative.

US President Joe Biden has been talking up the idea of a cease-fire deal in recent days, but Netanyahu's plan seems to make the deal brokered in Qatar an impossibility. Is Netanyahu serious about bringing an end to the conflict? Or is talk about a possible deal more about Israel's need to be seen to be playing the game as well as optimism from a US president who needs to be able to show to his own voter base that he is getting results? Former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert argues that Netanyahu is dragging Israel into a long-term war to save himself. Olmert draws some drastic conclusions from his analysis suggesting that Netanyahu and his far-right allies want a permanent war that would also see Palestinians driven out of the West Bank. That might seem too apocalyptic — but it does convey a sense of the mismatch between US aims and the Israeli political dynamic.

What is quite clear is that both Israel and Hamas have been dragging their feet as each thinks it is gaining the advantage by continuing the fighting. But with the arrival of the month of Ramadan (beginning March 10 — the date that Israel plans to begin its ground assault on the city of Rafah) there is some likelihood of a Ramadan truce.

The full article first appeared on *The Conversation*.

What are Village Leagues Israel is reviving to replace Hamas?



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PERSPECTIVE

Israel intends to maintain "security control" over Gaza while giving few details. However, there have been reports about how Israel is planning to administer the Gaza Strip, or at least the parts that it manages to occupy.

Israel's brutal war on Gaza and its land reoccupation of large parts of the Palestinian territory, despite continued resistance by Hamas and other groups, has left it with a dilemma.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has put forth little in the way of a "day after" plan for Gaza and has said that

Netanyahu has already ruled out allowing President Mahmoud Abbas's West Bank-based Palestinian Authority to take over the administration of Gaza. Israel appears to be planning to allow what it calls "influential family clans" to play a role in those areas of Gaza it controls. The Jerusalem Post reported that Israel wants to use these clans as a "shield" against Hamas attacks, saying that "even Hamas fears angering large families that have influence and power and may have

weapons as well". The clans' envisaged role appears to be limited to providing services and running local affairs, as well possibly as acting as local enforcers for the Israeli military. However, Israel has tried a similar experiment before in the West Bank, and it ended in utter failure. In the 1980s, in order to counter the influence of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in the occupied territory, Israel set up the Village Leagues.



Any leadership appointed by Israel will almost certainly face rejection and contempt.

