

Building the ISF for Gaza: Key Components for Effective Implementation

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Introduction: the time to shape the International Security Force

The Twenty Point Peace plan seems to promise a brighter future for Gazans and Israelis alike. It envisions a massive reconstruction effort coupled with a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR). It implies this will include deradicalization and the beginning of a brighter and more peaceful future for the Middle East, with the Arab World eventually normalizing relations with Israel and the solution for Gaza providing a model for beginning the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, at the moment this vision seems very far from reality, and for good reason. For reconstruction in Gaza to be meaningful, and not just building infrastructure for the next war, the territory must become secure and stable, which will not happen as long as Hamas and other armed factions continue to have power.

The views expressed in this article represent the personal views and research of the authors and are not necessarily those of the US Government or any US government entity

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This is why the keystone for the success of the plan is the creation and deployment of a capable and effective International Security Force (ISF) backed by an appropriate mandate, with the right force structure and national participation.¹

There is a palpable sense of skepticism emanating from Israelis when it comes to the International Security Force for Gaza and the possibility that it will bring security and stability to the troubled region. Israel, Gaza, and the US currently stand at a precipice. Success in Gaza, as hard as it may be to envision, can revolutionize conflict resolution in the region, while failure may render any realistic path towards peace all but illusory. Failure would also greatly harm the reputation and position of the US in the Middle East. The potential to succeed where so many other attempts have failed can only be realized if current policy and force design rise to the occasion and avoid the mistakes of the past.

Four Problems with Past Peacekeeping Forces

Historical experience provides ample evidence for Israeli skepticism. The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization ([UNTSO](#)), established in 1948, the longest serving UN force on the ground, has been there almost as long as Israel has existed. It failed to stop cross border violence in the 1950s, and in 1967, the Jordanians bombarded Israeli Jerusalem over the heads of the UN and even launched their primary attack through the [UN headquarters](#) building. Later forces like the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) in Sinai fared little better. Perhaps the most ignominious of all failed international peacekeeping interventions, and the one that looms largest in Israeli minds, is that of UNIFIL II. Like the current ISF being prepared for Gaza, UNIFIL II was supposed to disarm militants and bring peace and security to Lebanon and Israel alike. But, by 2023, it was clear that UNIFIL II had, at best, failed to prevent and at times perhaps even had members of the [force potentially collude with Hezbollah](#). What went wrong with these forces stemmed from four problems: their mandate, their capability, the contributing countries, and the ways in which they could respond to events. It is these areas that the ISF and the governance plan for Gaza need to get right if it has any hope of succeeding.

The mandate

The success or failure of the ISF begins with its mandate. In order for the ISF to be able to live up to its potential, the mandate must give it the authority to be proactive both in its mission and its use of force. To prevent it from being simply another UN monitoring organization, the ISF ability to use force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter must be in its mandate. This is hardly unique as it was the case with both [INTERFET](#) in East Timor and [KFOR in Kosovo](#).

The ISF must be able to take any and all steps necessary to disarm and demilitarize the strip and respond to provocations as well as provide security for the population. It

¹ Already In November 2023, Mitvim [made the case](#) for how a multinational peacekeeping force could serve to bring stability to Gaza.

would be best if these tasks were explicit as part of the mandate. Historically, vagueness in mandates have tended to harm the purpose of multinational forces. The ambiguity in the language surrounding the establishment of UNIFIL II paved the way for it to ignore the original intent while “fulfilling” its mandate. There are cases such as the current ceasefire in Lebanon where ambiguity has been to Israel’s benefit, but that has been the exception rather than the rule. This could be a cause for concern, as the reported [text of the potential UNSC](#) resolution, the veracity of which has not yet been confirmed, only provides for the ISF to “assist the BoP (Board of Peace) in monitoring the implementation of the ceasefire in Gaza, and enter into such arrangements as may be necessary to achieve the objectives of the Comprehensive Plan.” Such language could allow for the ISF to shirk some of its most critical tasks while still fulfilling the technical language of its mandate.

The mandate for both the ISF and transitional governance authorities for Gaza should include both the process and criteria by which it will transition or withdraw in the case of either success or failure, respectively. **The challenge of the current moment has been created in no small part by a failure to plan sufficiently for the end of the war.** It would be an equally if not worse mistake to not set out clear objective-based criteria for the ISF. Such criteria would give the contributing countries a clear objective on which to orient planning and create transparency with all stakeholders. These will necessarily include benchmarks which will determine transition points by which the ISF and governing authority can gradually transfer responsibilities to a Palestinian government and local security force in a phased approach. While the failure criteria do not need to be in the mandate, they are also still important and should be clearly understood by all. The proposed UNSC draft reported in the media substitutes clear criteria for a two-year mandate. Such a time frame smacks of the “home by Christmas,” short war, type of optimism that can accompanies military planning. Moreover, it gives Hamas and its allies the hope that they can simply wait out the ISF.

The Participants – Capabilities and Countries

Even with the best of mandates, the ISF will not succeed without the right participants. The ISF mission will have to fulfil four different yet complementary tasks – deterrence, training, security, and demilitarization. Taken together they must have sufficient numbers and capabilities to achieve not only the disarmament mission but also provide security in Gaza until an alternative can be built. First, there needs to be a guarantor force – in other words a well-armed and capable force who can provide a backstop should Hamas or other militants seek to overthrow the ISF or discredit it by violating the ceasefire. The presence of such a force would also help deter this possibility. Second, there needs to be a component of the ISF to vet and train the planned Palestinian police and security forces. This will be a long commitment. While a Palestinian force may eventually be able to play a role in security in Gaza, they have a long way to go to build both capability and legitimacy so as not to suffer the same fate of their pre-2007 predecessors.

A third component of the ISF will consist of the bulk of the required forces and undertake most of the ISF activities including patrolling, securing borders, and maintaining security. The final component consists of those specialists needed to engage in the demilitarization of infrastructure, including locating and eliminating subterranean constructs. In addition to this, there will need to be the usual complement of support personnel. These components do not all need to come from the same country, but there are some requirements for each.

Overall, the ISF must have a headquarters capable of coordinating with and supporting the governance authority who will have the primary role in reconstructing Gaza and many of the tasks of the DDR process. The guarantor force must come from a country that is both combat experienced and capable. While the overall force must have some legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinians and international community, the guarantor force will be there to reassure Israel that it does not need to intervene further in Gaza. While there is not a long list of potential guarantors, there are some countries, primarily in Europe, the Pacific and Oceania, and North America, still on it. With a sufficient guarantor force, the majority of other forces can come from a variety of countries provided that do not have close links with any of the factions in Gaza or open hostility to Israel. This could include both countries in the Middle East and Europe, as well as US allies in South America. This should also all but rule out some countries such as Qatar, Turkey, and Ireland from playing a central role in the ISF due to Israeli concerns. Any significant participation by such countries in the ISF military mission (though not necessarily other parts of the reconstruction mission and security mission) will undermine the legitimacy of the ISF in Israeli eyes and risk that the parts of the ISF might work to counter to its established mandate.

In addition to the standard complement of capabilities like military working dogs and engineers needed as part of the demilitarization component, effective counter-subterranean knowledge and capabilities will be essential. There are only a handful of countries that have either of those. If these countries cannot take part in the Gaza mission, Israel could step in to help prepare that component of the ISF by sharing its wealth of experience and knowledge, but that again is only likely with a country which Israel trusts.

The Structure

With the right mandate, capabilities, and participants, the ISF has a chance for success but can still run into trouble if its structure paralyzes it into inaction. The ISF needs to be structured to act in accordance with its mandate without overly cumbersome external consultation. While many countries may make up the various forces of the ISF, it requires a unified command with authority over those forces. Additionally, while it must work in concert with the civilian governing authority for Gaza and not undermine its activities, it cannot afford to be overly bogged down in seeking permission for each tactical operation. This is a problem that has affected many multinational interventions including, famously, [UNPROFOR in Bosnia](#), where

emergency requests for close air support could take hours. At the same time, it will need to be responsive to the concerns of both the transitional government and key stakeholders such as Israel and Egypt as well as international humanitarian actors. Developing a coordinating headquarters to process and prioritize requests for assistance will be key. The US military set up similar headquarters in Thailand and throughout the Indian Ocean region to provide logistical support to humanitarian organizations as part of [CSF-536](#) in the wake of the 2004 Tsunami – a similar approach would be useful here. While necessary, such coordination would prove insufficient on its own.

Stakeholder Cooperation and Proactive Israeli Involvement

For key stakeholders, there must be a more direct path at both the command and staff through standing liaisons empowered to represent their respective countries, needs and perspectives. These should certainly include the Israelis and perhaps the Palestinian Authority as well. To empower the stakeholders and help guarantee that the ISF completes its mission, it should require a regular stakeholder report on its progress against the success and failure criteria. Repeated failures could trigger a clause very similar to the ceasefire in Lebanon where Israel, or others can intervene to protect their interests, but such actions might have the effect of undermining the ISF in the eyes of the Palestinians. A better approach might be that a report by a sufficient number of critical stakeholders (such as Israel, the US, Egypt, the Gaza Transition Authority, and others as they commit forces) that the ISF is failing in its mission should trigger a change in command and eventually a withdrawal of the force. This will force the ISF to be responsive to stakeholders' needs but not have them involved or exercising veto powers on day-to-day tactical operations.

Setting up a successful ISF will not be a simple process and without the right participants it may never get off the ground. There are steps Israel can take in the meantime to help. Rather than standing by as the ISF assembles, Israel can use its remaining diplomatic capabilities to help shape it in a positive manner. While Israel has let it be known when a country is truly unacceptable for a major role in ISF, it should also be equally vocal as to the countries it would be willing to consider and work to encourage their participation. While much of the focus on ISF participation has centered on Middle Eastern countries, few are acceptable to Israel, have the capabilities to provide the bulk of the forces, or can act as a guarantor (though their participation will help with international legitimacy). However, there are countries outside the region such as Azerbaijan, Singapore, or Indonesia who may be of more assistance.

Israel could offer inducements to militaries taking part, such as offering to train them in the requirements of operations in Gaza and a degree of intelligence sharing. This would be particularly appealing to less combat experienced and capable militaries who rarely have access to the kind of training Israel can provide. To reduce the costs for the ISF, Israel could provide some of the important support requirements. For example, Israel has become extremely proficient at medical evacuation and treatment of casualties from Gaza. Israel could continue providing this capability in case ISF troops become injured (perhaps with a cost sharing agreement from the ISF countries). Israel can also set conditions for ISF success by continuing to operate behind the Yellow Line to clear unexploded ordinance and demilitarize infrastructure. All of these actions will help reduce the prodigious costs associated with taking part in the ISF and make its successful formation more likely.

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Concluding remarks

For the US and Israel, the moment could not be more critical. For Israel, the success of the Gaza Transition Authority and the ISF may end the major threat from Gaza. It can give the region a chance to move forward and try a different path and perhaps provide a model for conflict resolution. The ISF is but one part of what Gaza requires – governance reform, DDR, deradicalization, humanitarian aid, reconstruction, and the establishment of a functional security sector will all be needed to secure a better future but without ISF success none of this will be meaningful. Failure of the ISF will mean that the war exhausted populations of Israel and Gaza will find themselves locked into the countdown for another round of violence and war. For the US, Gaza now has strategic ramifications far beyond its local consequences. The majority of Israelis believe – right or wrong – that the US is now calling the shots on Gaza. Moreover, the US has messaged that its ability to deliver the ceasefire is directly related to its global prestige. Having committed, failure brings a significant risk to its global standing at a time when it is trying to compete with other superpowers. On the other hand, for the US, success will demonstrate that it alone can do what no other country can – build peace in one of the most difficult conflicts in the Middle East.

