

Is there still a Path for an International Security Force in Gaza

Policy Paper

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The US twenty-point peace plan that marked the end of Gaza War created an opportunity to break the political stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and advance major moves. Yet, progress on some of the most critical areas of security and stability is proceeding slowly. There has been some progress like the return of all the hostages, alive and dead, and the establishment of the [National Committee for Administration of Gaza](#) (NCAG), and the partial opening of [Rafah crossing](#) with the return of an [EU assistance mission](#). However, in today's reality, absent a concerted effort, the chance for a broader, more immediate and meaningful change in Gaza that could lead to a broader diplomatic initiative is gradually receding. As a result, the danger is that the "yellow line" will become the new border and that the situation in Gaza where the IDF controls over fifty percent of the Strip while Hamas continues to rule over the majority of the Gazan population, will continue. This would leave the population dependent on basic humanitarian aid and exploited by a reconstituting Hamas looking forward to another war while Israel attempts a return to a strategy of conflict management.

At the center of the UN resolution was the creation of an International Stabilization Force (ISF) for Gaza whose role it was to oversee the disarmament and demilitarization of the territory and create the security environment to allow for reconstruction and an alternative Palestinian Government. Such a force would need to be both robust and capable with a mandate to disarm and demilitarize the territory, protect reconstruction and governance efforts, and in possession of the authorities to complete the mission against any opposition. At this point, it looks increasingly less likely the ISF, if it deploys, will resemble this ideal, and in the meantime, Hamas is entrenching its power, [repositioning its capabilities](#), and rearming. This begs the question as to whether there is still a way for an ISF and therefore the Twenty Point Peace Plan to succeed. While all hope may not be lost without a robust ISF, the path to success will be narrow and rely instead upon an indirect approach.

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Gaza Today

At present Gaza is divided and is experiencing a low simmering of constant but low intensity violence. Hamas controls the roughly fifty percent of the territory which contains the majority of its population. In this area Hamas has reasserted its governance, authority, and terror while rebuilding its military capabilities. The Israel Defense Force (IDF) maintains a defensive posture along the “Yellow Line” and keeps Hamas from open activity in the area in between the Yellow Line and Israeli border. Humanitarian aid flows through the Israeli controlled zone and into the Hamas controlled zone, and there is evidence that Hamas [continues to divert aid](#) and [tax market goods](#).

Hamas regularly [tests the Israeli defenses](#) along the Yellow Line, and Israel [responds primarily with air strikes](#). In this way, both have fallen back to an older form of tit-for-tat violence with which both practiced before the October 7th attacks. This is hardly an encouraging state of affairs, nor is it clear how without a change in the operational environment, the NCAG can take control of governance, reconstruction can begin in earnest, or the IDF can withdraw. Gaza appears to be heading towards, if not a frozen conflict, then a constant low-level one that will last with a worsening humanitarian and security situation until it deteriorates further and there is another escalation.

The Direct Approach

The best way forward to prevent such an undesirable future would be to deploy a robust ISF. Other studies that Mitvim has already published lay out the requirements and benefits of such a force in detail you can find the [most recent one here](#) and the first one that [laid out the initial concept here](#). Suffice it to say that at its best, the ISF would have to have a mandate and rules of engagement that would allow it to enforce the demilitarization of Gaza and the disarmament of a recalcitrant Hamas. It would need capabilities such as military working dogs and specialist engineers to eliminate subterranean infrastructure, and eventually, the ability to either enter the Hamas-controlled area or to support a Palestinian Security Force in doing the same.

To enable this, while the bulk of the ISF would be involved with patrolling, securing borders, and maintaining security, the mission would require a guarantor force with more combat capabilities, including air power to provide a backstop and intervene should Hamas escalate. While the vision laid out in the previous studies is still possible, [countries have been reluctant to commit](#) to any mission that would involve directly confronting Hamas, particularly if it does not include some form of transition to Palestinian Authority governance. This places the direct approach to stabilizing the situation in Gaza, which would allow for relief, reconstruction, and a transition to a new Palestinian government in Gaza, out of reach. However, an indirect approach may still remain. While an indirect approach is not an ideal plan for implementation, it recognizes and copes with both the political and strategic realities as well as the realities on the ground to preserve the potential for a positive change that will result in something better than a mere return to managing the conflict while waiting for the next war.

An Indirect Approach in Gaza

In his seminal work, *The Strategy of Indirect Approach*, the British military theorist B. H. Liddell Hart summarized the concept of the indirect approach by saying “the longest way

round is apt to be the shortest way home.” He advised avoiding confronting the adversary when and where they are strongest and “[taking a line of least expectation](#)” which in practice often meant weakening an adversary, denying them critical resources, or hurting their morale. With the [direct route](#) to a better future in Gaza looking less likely, it may now be worth examining what the “the longest way round” may look like and what it will require of the ISF and Israel to make it “the shortest way home.” Taking the long way around will necessarily require the ISF to take an approach more in line with Liddell Hart’s theories, establish different relationship with the IDF from that [originally proposed](#), and undertake a different series of phases to succeed.

Absent specialist engineers that highly capable countries might bring, the ISF will not be able to demilitarize Gaza’s subterranean infrastructure, but they may be able to locate it. Without a guarantor force and without permissive rules of engagement, the ISF will not be able to confront Hamas in its strongholds. This is the reality of the current trajectory.

An indirect approach against Hamas would center on reducing its power and authority, starving it of resources, and slowly reducing it until it becomes a problem that could be tackled by a robust and capable law enforcement or gendarmerie rather than a military force. This will be impossible as long as the majority of the population of Gaza live under Hamas rule. As long as Hamas controls the majority of the population, Hamas will be able to tax and divert the majority of aid and commercial goods entering Gaza. This means that in order to succeed, eventually, an indirect approach in Gaza will eventually require allowing vetted civilians to move from the area under Hamas control through the Yellow Line and into a non-Hamas controlled area where they can live under the governance of the NCAG.

For the ISF, this approach would mean that at least initially they would take security responsibility for the less populated area between the Yellow Line and the Israeli border. This means that rather than relying on a guarantor force such as the US or a powerful European state for their protection, the less robust ISF will instead rely on IDF forces deployed along the Yellow Line between the ISF and Hamas-controlled Gaza. This will necessitate tight communication between the ISF and IDF to avoid friendly fire, enable medical evacuation, manage traffic flow behind the Yellow Line, and share intelligence on threats, among many other things. This reliance on Israel may risk ISF legitimacy with the Palestinian population, and the ISF will have to exude competence and impartiality in the areas under its control to mitigate this. On the other hand, if the ISF is to be trusted by Israel, which will be even more critical in an indirect approach, it will also have to demonstrate its ability to enforce security in its zones of control.

Following the logic of the indirect approach, in the first phase of its deployment, the ISF will need to take control of the least populated and least strategically important areas of Gaza between the IDF forces on the Yellow Line and Israeli border. This will give a chance to find its feet and prove its competency. This is especially important given the complexity of deploying a diverse multinational force with limited integrated training and experiencing working under US command to a combat zone. As it proves successful in one area between the Yellow Line and Israel and gains reputation and experience, it can expand to other areas East of the Yellow Line in coordination with the IDF. Eventually, as it proves itself, the ISF can take over security for all the areas East of the Yellow Line other than those routes on which the IDF relies to maintain its position. It would be advisable that the IDF and ISF act in coordination, but without joint patrols, so to keep a clearer separation in the eyes of the Palestinian population. As the ISF mission in Gaza takes control of territory, the ISF-related mission should begin training a well-vetted Palestinian Security Force for Gaza to augment

it and begin taking responsibility for civil security under the NCAG. If it lacks specialist engineers, the ISF will most likely have to contract out the neutralization of any subterranean infrastructure it identifies in its operational area to commercial entities.

The second phase of the indirect approach should begin once the ISF has demonstrated competence in its tasks and taken control of much of the area between the Yellow Line and Israel. In this phase, the ISF would provide security for the first major reconstruction efforts in Gaza. Some Palestinian civilians, especially those who can work in the reconstruction, and their families will need to resettle in the areas under the ISF at this point. This will be a critical moment for the indirect approach and ISF as they will need to be able guarantee the security of that population as well as the reconstruction effort itself. To enable this, and in coordination with the IDF, the first cadre of trained Palestinian Security forces will need to be deployed, as the ISF will need to prevent Hamas from infiltrating or corrupting the process.

The third phase of an indirect approach would need to begin once the first reconstruction efforts are complete and reconstructed areas are ready to accept population. The Yellow Line would need to become permeable through secure checkpoints that would allow vetted Palestinian civilians and their families to leave Hamas-controlled areas and resettle in the reconstructed areas of Gaza. This will lead to the requirement for a detention capability, as Hamas and others will inevitably attempt to smuggle people and equipment into the reconstructed area of Gaza. This phase is also where a disarmament, demilitarization, and reintegration (DDR) program could pay dividends, perhaps allowing for the families of members Hamas and other militant groups members who voluntarily disarm to resettle in the reconstructed zones under certain conditions such as continuous or random monitoring and agreeing to take part in deradicalization programs.

Over time, the movement of population away from Hamas-controlled areas will lower the amount of resources flowing in these areas and begin to starve Hamas and its allies of the tax revenues and supplies they need to continue to reconstitute. Moreover, it will carve away much of the population behind whom they hid and from whom they recruit. For this phase to succeed, it is not enough for the ISF to create security and for physical reconstruction to take place. The secured areas must have a functional economy that offers opportunity and schools free from the type of antisemitic propaganda that Hamas used to help radicalize a generation. It also will need to be free from the type of corruption and violence that helped turn the population of Gaza away from the Palestinian Authority almost twenty years ago.

The end of the third phase and the transition to the fourth phase would come on two conditions. The first is that there is a sufficient Palestinian Security Force to begin to operate against Hamas in a limited capacity. The second key condition is that the phase has degraded Hamas to the extent that is fragile as an organization. At this point, with ISF support, the Palestinian Security Forces will begin to operate against those elements in the Hamas-controlled area that have refused to disarm. Its capability to do so and add areas formerly under Hamas control to NCAG and ISF control, would then be the critical transition point that could signal the beginning of the IDF withdrawal called for in the Twenty Point Plan.

Adapting an indirect approach is not giving up nor admitting all is lost; it is a recognition of the current reality and trajectory. While not ideal, it provides a phased way forward that can prevent the entrenchment of the current situation as a new normal even if Hamas does not voluntarily disarm and the ISF cannot or will not disarm it. It can advance towards a reality that weakens Hamas, strengthens moderates, improves security in the Gaza border

communities, builds effective Palestinian governing institutions that enjoy both internal and external legitimacy, and allows for an “emerging peace” approach. This in turn might lay a stronger foundation for the future realization of a comprehensive political process when political will emerges. Furthermore, an indirect approach need not necessarily be slow moving and stagnant. What starts out as a gradual approach may even gain momentum to the point that Hamas may weaken rapidly enough for the ISF to move rapidly to the third or fourth phase as conditions allow. Alternatively, if the ISF appears successful more countries may want to join which could allow for a return to a more direct approach.

The Risk of an Indirect Approach

The inherent challenge of any indirect approach is that it is both time consuming and can stall. An indirect approach for Gaza would be no different. The UN Security Council has given the ISF a two-year period in which to fulfill its mandate. That time is marching on despite an ISF not yet being deployed. It is highly likely that an indirect approach will take well over two years to succeed and require a long-term commitment for the countries involved. Similarly, the ability to transition among phases will rely on conditions outside the control of the ISF and the cooperation of both Palestinian Security Force and the IDF. Even then it could stall on any phase and possibly withdraw or create the kind of instability before completing the mission, which would put Palestinian civilians who have moved into the reconstructed area under Israeli occupation, something both Israel and the Palestinians have indicated they wish to avoid.

The transitions among phases, especially between phases two and three will require Israeli acquiescence. If Israel does not trust the ISF or proves intransigent, the threat of the process becoming stalled part way through is more likely. For Gaza to move on from Hamas rule, the areas under the ISF will have to develop functional economies. This will require the ability to import and export as well as require increased investment, including agricultural redevelopment. While there are ways to mitigate the potential security threats this will create, it will also require Israeli willingness to work in a constructive manner.

Finally, Hamas is unlikely to let an indirect approach succeed without attempting to fight or undermine it. It has [a number of approaches it can take](#), from trying to embarrass and discredit the ISF as well as the overall plan to overwhelming checkpoints or causing civilian casualties. It could try to infiltrate and corrupt the NCAG or the reconstructed communities themselves. It could even try to attack the ISF or renew the war with Israel. Whatever the case, the ISF will have to coordinate with IDF and other security services to plan and prepare for all of these contingencies.

Concluding Remarks

With no ISF on the ground, the other elements of the reconstruction and stabilization of Gaza appear ephemeral. The NCAG may exist, but it has little authority or influence on the ground. Humanitarian aid may flow, but reconstruction may not follow. If it does, it may only serve to benefit Hamas in the long run. In the meantime, Israel and Gaza are settling into to a daily rhythm of violence that shows no signs of abetting and is more likely to escalate. It looks unlikely that even if the ISF deploys, it will not follow the lessons of historical international interventions and be robust enough to take a direct approach to establishing security in Gaza. Moreover, few countries, especially in the Muslim world, are anxious to take the risks

of confronting Hamas. This means that while more desirable, the likelihood for a direct approach is rapidly evaporating. At such times, an indirect approach may offer a lifeline. Taking an indirect approach may not be the preferable option and would require coordination, patience, and commitment, but in the long run, it can still offer hope of success. The US has staked a lot of its strategic credibility in the region on the success of the stabilization of Gaza for Israelis and Palestinian alike, as it is literally a matter of life and death for those in the region. If a direct approach proves impossible, then the indirect approach, as hard as it will be and as long as it takes, may be the only remaining path to prevent a cycle of violence and renewed war.

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