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Scenarios for the Palestinian issue after the Gaza war

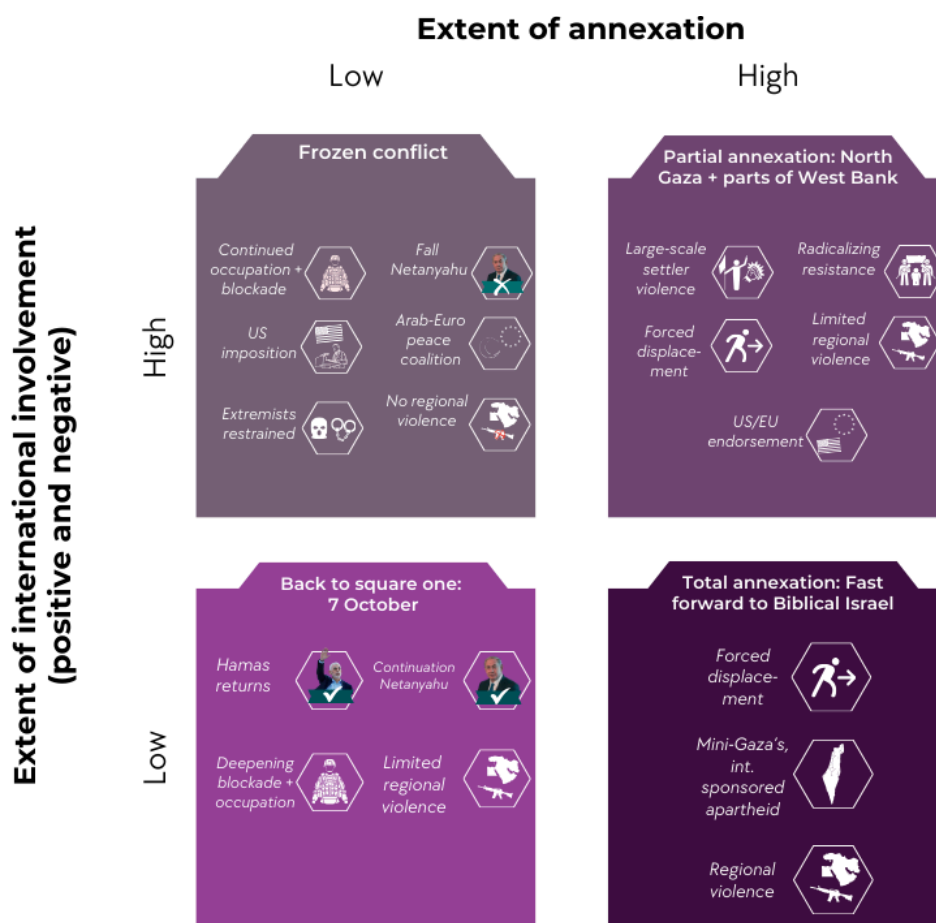


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In response to the massacre that Hamas perpetrated on 7 October 2023, Israeli forces are engaged in an all-out effort to eliminate the movement. The battle is taking place on a narrow and densely populated strip of land, with more than 2 million people living in an area comparable to twice the size of Washington DC. Gaza had already been suffering a humanitarian crisis that was largely caused by a 16-years old Israeli blockade. Every day across the world, many people are torn between showing solidarity with Israel in the wake of the horror of 7 October and protesting loudly against Israel's punitive

expedition in Gaza. It is clear that Hamas's rampage should face retribution. It is also clear that we can no longer look away from the reality and the ultimate consequences of 56 years of Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories – ever since the 1967 war.

Today, there is a mounting number of calls for humanitarian pauses and a cease-fire. But there is little reflection to date on the future of the wider Palestinian issue after the Gaza war. What might happen next? To cite the Israeli writer Etgar Keret about lessons that can be



learned from the current tragedies: “[...] we have to search and we have to allow ourselves to be confused and to look for answers, not to have them instantly.”¹ Sketching scenarios is a way to look at the future by make ambiguity tangible, including undesirable outcomes, and to encourage reflection. Moreover, Haaretz journalist Anshel Pfeffer argued on X that the Israeli government lacks an exit strategy for Gaza. This makes it all the more important to consider the future. For also after this war, two traumatised populations are condemned to continue existing side by side. Below are four scenarios for the Palestinian issue once ongoing ground operations in Gaza have ended. They describe possible futures, however uncertain, and encourage us to consider how we feel about these.

1 See [Interview New York Times](#), 27 October 2023 (accessed 14 November 2023).

Scenario 1 – Back to square one: the situation before 7 October

According to this scenario, Israel limits its ground operations to northern Gaza. Any extension of the current battle towards southern Gaza causes immense humanitarian suffering and forced displacement that is tantamount to ethnic cleansing, which the international community cannot accept. The Israeli government also lacks a feasible plan for the future governance of Gaza. Although Prime Minister Netanyahu recently alluded to the possibility, it would be costly and dangerous for Israel itself to take on this role. The Palestinian Authority will not be inclined to do so either, as many Palestinians see this organisation as an Israeli extension already. No Arab country will volunteer for a role as administrator of Gaza. The venomous Israeli discourse in the United Nations also makes it difficult for New York to step in. That is why Israel

eventually creates a new Palestinian governing body, which it knows will ultimately be infiltrated and controlled by Hamas, albeit under a new name. Although an opinion poll conducted by the *Israel Democracy Institute* found that most Israelis no longer have much confidence in their government, the Netanyahu government attempts to return to 'business as usual'.²

This means continuation of the blockade of Gaza, further expansion of settlements in the West Bank and more settler violence with impunity. Even if Netanyahu were to be forced from power, the political map of Israel remains roughly unchanged. According to the *Israel Democracy Institute*, few voters are likely to change their political affiliation.³ This suggests a new right-wing, or even extreme right coalition, with more appointments like that of Zvi Sikkot, who was recently made chair of a subcommittee of the Israeli parliament for the West Bank. Sikkot is a settler and has been repeatedly charged in court for inciting violence against Palestinians.

One consequence of this scenario is that Gaza remains the Achilles' heel of Israeli occupation. Without any political perspective and better economic prospects, organisations like Hamas are inevitable. Israel will need to invest time and money in controlling such threats, with all concomitant risks. Further outbreaks of violence are also inevitable, whether in Gaza or the West Bank. This would bring all parties back to square one. A last consequence is that a regional conflict will be prevented, at least for the time being. The Secretary-General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, stated in his speeches on 3 and 10 November that the destruction of Hamas is a reason for his movement to intervene, but in this scenario Israel only decimates Hamas. Regional cooperation, for instance with Saudi Arabia, can be revived in due course.

2 The Israel Democracy Institute, *War in Gaza public opinion survey (2)*, 18-19/10/2023 at <https://en.idi.org.il/media/21835/war-in-gaza-public-opinion-survey-2-data.pdf> (accessed 12 November 2023).

3 Hermann, T. and O. Anabi, *Most Israelis Prefer to Wait Until After the War to Designate Responsibility*, Israeli Voice Index: War on Hamas, The Israel Democracy Institute, 31 October 2023, [online](#) (accessed 12 November 2023).

Signs indicative of this scenario include Israel limiting its ground offensive to northern Gaza, creating military buffer zones, postponing a parliamentary inquiry into the government's failings on 7 October, and continuing the gradual expansion of occupation and settler violence in the West Bank.

Scenario 2 – Partial annexation: North Gaza and parts of the West Bank

In this scenario, Israel goes beyond a temporary ground offensive in northern Gaza and annexes this part of the Gaza Strip instead. Israel deports most of the remaining Palestinians to southern Gaza to reduce the threat to the Israeli cities of Ashkelon, Ashdod and Sderot, as well as surrounding kibbutzim. It also creates military buffer zones. As a result, South Gaza is effectively turned into a 'humanitarian super camp', to borrow from the American analyst Nathan Brown.⁴ The Israeli government furthermore uses the events of 7 October to justify the annexation of Area C of the West Bank (roughly 60%), or a part of it, citing national security. Even someone like Yair Lapid, the political leader of the self-proclaimed centrist liberal party Yesh Atid, recently made it clear that he views the entire West Bank as Israeli territory. Ministers Bezalel Smotrich (Finance) and Itamar Ben-Gvir (National Security) continue to abet the settler movement. The international community continues to protest, but the US and the EU consider partial annexation as the price to pay for avoiding a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza.

One consequence of this scenario is that Israel reinforces its occupation and blockade, expands illegal settlements, and proceeds with some form of forced displacement resembling ethnic cleansing. Regionally, this scenario rules out any further normalisation of relations. Even authoritarian Arab regimes cannot ignore the

4 Brown, N., *There might be no day after in Gaza*, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 November 2023, [online](#) (accessed 12 November 2023).

deep and growing aversion towards Israel among their populations. Israel becomes isolated in the United Nations. It is furthermore likely that Iran and its allies launch an asymmetric campaign of attacks and rocket fire, arming Palestinian splinter groups in the process, to which Israel and the US respond with bombardments and reprisals. Whereas the Palestinian Authority remained a marginal actor in the previous scenario, here it becomes irrelevant. This opens the door to Hamas and other radical resistance groups, leading to a spiral of violence between settlers and Palestinians. The latter population is gradually corralled within the cities of Nablus, Jericho, Ramallah, Hebron, Bethlehem and Jenin, which each becomes a mini-Gaza of its own in humanitarian terms.

Signs indicative of this scenario include a permanent and large-scale Israeli military presence in North Gaza, rebuilding former Israeli settlements on the strip, an increasing number of violent incidents perpetrated by West Bank settlers – without any concrete international intervention – and the Netanyahu government (or a variant) remaining in power.

Scenario 3 – Total annexation: Fast forward to Biblical Israel

In this scenario, the Israeli government responds to trigger events by fully annexing the West Bank and Gaza. Such an event could be the murder of a gang of marauding settlers, or the destruction of an Israeli infantry unit in an Hamas ambush in Gaza. It can also occur at a later date, so that scenario 1 or 2 evolves into scenario 3. In this scenario, the Israeli government takes a significant step towards the realization of the State of Israel on the basis of its Biblical conception. As rabbi Amichai Friedman of the Israeli Defense Forces put it: “[...] this land is ours. The whole country. All of it. Including Gaza. Including Lebanon. The whole promised land.”⁵

5 As quoted in Haaretz, 5 November 2023: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-05/ty-article/rabbi-at-israeli-military-base-says-whole-country-is-ours-including-gaza-and-lebanon/0000018b-a031-d42c-a9ef-ad772cdc0000>.

The ‘old’ historic suffering of the Jewish people is irreversibly converted into a ‘new’ historic suffering by the Palestinian people.

This scenario has severe consequences. Palestinians are forced to concentrate in urban camps such as Khan Yunis, Jenin and Jericho, under Israeli security supervision. The UN and various NGOs provide basic humanitarian services. This way, the international community indirectly funds a permanent apartheid regime. Urban camp formation goes hand in hand with the large-scale eviction of Palestinian villages to make way for Israeli settlements. Another consequence of this scenario is an upsurge in armed and radicalised Palestinian resistance with the support of Iran and its allies. It might even lead to collaboration between Iran, Jordan and Egypt. The latter two countries prefer to see Palestinians commit violence in and against Israel, rather than running the risk of Palestinian refugees destabilising their own countries. The Palestinian Authority has ceased to exist in this scenario and Palestinian committees run the urban camps. One last consequence of this scenario is that a regional escalation of the conflict becomes a certainty rather than a possibility.

Signs indicative of this scenario are an expansion of the current Israeli ground offensive in Gaza to the south, the occurrence of trigger events such as lethal attacks on Israeli troops or citizens at scale, an intensification of Israeli annexation rhetoric and settler violence under the protection of the Israeli Defense Forces and the Netanyahu government (or a variant) remaining in power.

Scenario 4 – A frozen conflict

In this scenario, the growing number of casualties in Gaza, an increasing number of potential war crimes, and the escalating risk of a regional conflict cause the US to force Israel to halt its ground offensive. This could be triggered by an event that clearly violates humanitarian law in a culpable and large-scale manner, such as the Israeli attack on the Al-Quds hospital in Gaza with white phosphorous shells in 2009. While the Israeli government considers its options,

international calls to permanently abandon the invasion of Gaza gathers force. Hamas releases a number of hostages to further increase the pressure. The resulting pause leads to the fall of the Netanyahu government. In this vacuum, a number of countries join forces to establish an international forum to peacefully resolve the Palestinian issue. This includes regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and perhaps even Egypt, operating with EU countries that have more historical understanding of the Palestinian issue such as Spain, France, Ireland and Belgium. They manage to secure a powerful mandate from the UN Security Council with the goal of undoing the Israeli occupation, reforming the Palestinian Authority, and disarming Hamas. Saudi Arabia makes further normalisation of its relations with Israel conditional on such a mandate in its talks with the US. This ad hoc coalition starts preliminary talks with Israeli and Palestinian peace organisations under the watchful eye of the international community, while the Israeli occupation and blockade continue unabated.

The main consequence of this scenario is that further conflict escalation is temporarily avoided: in Gaza, the West Bank and regionally. This makes it harder for Iran to meddle in the conflict and creates room for Saudi Arabia and Israel's neighbours to mediate. Another consequence is that international intervention can provide a platform for moderate Israeli and Palestinian voices. Extremists such as Hamas and Israeli settlers are forced to take a back seat. Just before 7 October, for example, the Arab Barometer reported that 67% of Gaza's inhabitants had 'none' to 'little' confidence in Hamas.⁶

Signs indicative of this scenario include a large-scale, specific and culpable humanitarian incident in Gaza, growing American diplomatic pressure on Israel, increasing instability of the Netanyahu government and signs that members of the ad hoc coalition are truly prepared to take action.

By way of conclusion

Scenarios are possible versions of the future that stimulate further reflection, including undesirable outcomes. The negative spiral of current events and the absence of an Israeli exit strategy for Gaza makes such reflection all the more important, if only to prevent a new chapter of violence in this ongoing tragedy.

6 Jamal, A. and M. Robbins, *What Palestinians Really Think of Hamas*, Foreign Affairs, 25 October 2023, [online](#).

About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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