

After the Deal

U.S. Policy for a Postwar Gaza

A WHITE PAPER

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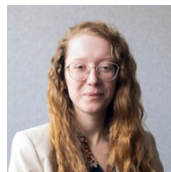
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Executive Summary

More than two years have passed since the devastating October 7, 2023, attack on Israel by Hamas (a.k.a. *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*, or Islamic Resistance Movement) and the beginning of the terrorist group's most recent war with the Israeli military. At the White House on September 29, 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump, alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, revealed his 20-point plan for peace in Gaza. Just days later, on October 9, both Israel and Hamas agreed to the first phase of the peace deal, which calls for the release and return of all hostages, a significant increase in humanitarian aid, and a partial Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. While this plan implemented a much-needed ceasefire and established a framework for future negotiations, much skepticism remains about more complicated issues such as postwar reconstruction and governance—as well as whether Trump's plan can adequately address the needs of both Palestinians and Israelis for security, justice, accountability, and human rights.

It is in the United States' interest to make a long-term diplomatic commitment to overseeing and enforcing peace in postwar Gaza. Doing so effectively can address both Hamas's control over the Gaza Strip and its institutions, as well as Israel's continued military presence in Gaza. The end goal of the Trump 20-point plan is to facilitate Palestinian self-governance sans Hamas or military occupation. To succeed, the Trump peace plan must effectively (1) create and support new avenues for Palestinian self-governance, (2) present actionable plans for rebuilding Gaza's critical infrastructure and providing much-needed humanitarian assistance, and (3) maintain a ceasefire in the long term, ending the cycles of ongoing violence. Stability in Gaza also benefits Israel—a key U.S. ally in the Middle East—by preventing additional Israeli casualties on the battlefield, bringing greater stability to the region, and creating a blueprint for future dialogue with neighboring countries.

Although this monumental peace plan has led to the return of all living Israeli hostages and a halt to the fighting, the risk of ceasefire violations runs high. It is therefore imperative for U.S. policymakers to engage with international partners to quickly organize a stabilization force and develop concrete plans for reconstruction and postwar governance. Doing so will ensure that Gaza's immediate needs are met sustainably, allowing actors to work toward longer-term peace efforts in the future.

This white paper argues that a restructured social service architecture will be crucial to postwar Gaza's success. Without reforming the key pillars of Gaza's social service architecture—in addition to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and other structures of local government—Gazan civilians will be forced to continue to rely on a network of Hamas-run nongovernmental organizations, religious groups, and government ministries for basic needs such as medical care, public safety, and education. This is a recipe for Hamas's continued dominance, ensuring its consistent access to a population within which it can recruit members and cloak itself.

While the end goal of the Trump 20-point plan is to facilitate self-governance without Hamas or military occupation, removing Hamas means leaving a significant power vacuum behind. Answering the question of “Who will be in charge?” is key to ensuring that postwar Gaza has a chance at recovery and reconstruction, as is ensuring that Palestinian voices have a role in postwar planning discussions and a say in how their territory is run by a civilian government. Despite the peace deal's signing, it remains to be seen how the negotiating parties will arrive at an agreement that officially ends the war and disarms Hamas. Gaza still requires billions of dollars of investment and significant on-the-ground assistance to facilitate reconstruction efforts, distribute aid, restructure basic services, provide security, and reform the PA. While meeting these needs is a monumental task, the longer a ceasefire holds without a postwar governance agreement and financial support from the international community, the greater the risk that the conflict resumes.

Introduction

On September 29, 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump released a draft of a 20-point plan that—if successfully implemented—would permanently end the war in Gaza, exchange all Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners, and establish a “technocratic, apolitical Palestinian committee,” overseen by a transitional body chaired by Trump.¹ This “Board of Peace” would oversee Gaza’s reconstruction and development, as well as monitor reforms to the Palestinian Authority (PA). While this plan placed sufficient pressure on both Israel and Hamas and pushed them to sign onto phase one of Trump’s peace deal, as of the time of this report’s publication, many details remain unresolved. Major sticking points include Hamas’s disarmament and the makeup of the “technocratic, apolitical Palestinian committee” that will oversee day-to-day functions in Gaza.² Critically, the proposal fails to lay out mechanisms for reforming Gaza’s social services, many of which Hamas still dominates.³

This white paper argues that a successful long-term plan for postwar Gaza must: 1) supplant Hamas charities and welfare organizations with capable and efficient government institutions run by Palestinians who are trusted by Gaza’s populace, 2) restore law and order, and 3) revitalize the PA with a new generation of local leadership. The United States should support a reconstruction effort that prioritizes participation from a generation of young Palestinians that are historically unrepresented by their government and invests in a quality social service infrastructure, thus replacing Hamas institutions and removing major avenues for its future influence over Gazan society.

Implementing a widely accepted postwar governance structure is not without challenges. The PA holds little authority and is deeply unpopular in both the West Bank and Gaza, as well as internationally.⁴ Throughout the war in Gaza, both the Biden and Trump administrations have expressed concerns about Ramallah’s ability to assume responsibility for postwar Gaza. Under the Biden administration, policymakers maintained that the PA needs to be “revamped and revitalized” to regain legitimacy and public trust.⁵ Statements from President Donald Trump further build upon decades of Washington’s distrust of the PA.⁶

Throughout the conflict, several governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have published plans that lay out strategies for postwar Gaza, but none attracted widespread support from key stakeholders.⁷ Many of those plans presented creative policy solutions, but most also failed to ask Palestinians what they wanted to see in a reformed government. Though Trump’s plan garnered major international backing, it still fails to definitively answer the question: What comes after Hamas? This paper presents one potential solution to that question by proposing a strategic approach to governance focused on restoring stability to Gaza and weakening Hamas’s ideological base. It also articulates additional U.S. policy options to support this approach to postwar planning and regional diplomacy.

This paper first examines what Gaza means for Washington. It then explains how Hamas has entrenched itself in Gazan society over the past 19 years by fostering local dependency on its network of charities and welfare organizations—a tactic characteristic of the group’s roots in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.⁸ Next, it briefly reviews polling and demographic statistics from the Gaza Strip, which provide crucial insights into Gazan political opinion and what Palestinians actually want to see in their postwar government. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations for U.S. policymakers and postwar planners to support ceasefire efforts, advance regional peace, and significantly degrade Hamas’s influence over Gazan society through nonmilitary means.

What Gaza Means for Washington

Since Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel and the beginning of the current war, the conflict in Gaza has posed a major political challenge for Washington. Both the Biden and Trump administrations have faced tough policy choices over the role the United States plays in Israel's defense and Gaza's humanitarian situation. Additional challenges as a result of the conflict in Gaza relate to the safety of American troops and bases in the region, as well as dwindling U.S. munition supplies and humanitarian aid logistics.⁹ The war in Gaza also caused spillover effects, prompting Israel to target Iran's networks of proxies across the region, including Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthis, targets in Syria, and even Iran itself. Not only did this result in challenges to critical U.S. military logistics, but it also made American military and diplomatic positions in the region targets for Israeli and American adversaries—namely, Tehran and its proxies.¹⁰

The American military's involvement in the post-October 7 Middle East—in an effort to come to Israel's defense and safeguard its own interests in the region—has placed immense pressure on its global positioning. In June 2025, Washington deployed two aircraft carriers to the region, shifted two destroyers based in the Mediterranean closer to Israel, and sent a number of Patriot air defense batteries to the area—including two it pulled from Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM).¹¹ Additionally, since October 7, the U.S. military has actively participated in two military campaigns—one in Yemen and another in Iran—prompting controversy among both Democrats and Republicans as Washington shuffled military assets around the globe.¹² Many Republicans view increased American military involvement in the Middle East as a contradiction to many of Trump's campaign trail promises, while many Democrats support ending American arms sales to Israel and want to see more humanitarian aid sent to Gazans.¹³

The protracted war has also prevented the Trump White House from accomplishing many of its broader regional and global policy objectives, including Israeli-Saudi normalization, an expansion of the Abraham Accords, and the withdrawal of American troops from Syria and Iraq.¹⁴ The Trump and Biden administrations have both noted a commitment to “promot[ing] a free and open Indo-Pacific” and engaging in strategic competition with China.¹⁵ Critics of American involvement in recent Middle East conflicts argue that Washington cannot effectively “pivot” to Asia while regularly redeploying military assets from INDOPACOM to the Mediterranean and spending billions of American taxpayer dollars on Israel's defense.¹⁶

By overseeing postwar reconstruction, the United States will be able to more effectively prioritize competition with other major adversaries such as China and Russia, as well as mitigate the risk of getting drawn into additional military conflicts in the Middle East. If Washington both privately and publicly presses Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to commit to a ceasefire in Gaza, U.S. military and civilian targets are also less likely to come under fire from Iranian proxies, who see Washington as a key Israeli partner—and therefore a valid target. Without having to devote intense diplomatic attention to ceasefire negotiations, Trump will also be able to refocus U.S. foreign policy to prioritize his administration's regional and global policy objectives.

By helping to answer Gaza's long-term question, Washington has a golden opportunity to help stabilize a region that has been plagued by near-constant conflict since Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack. Additionally, the United States can further develop and reinvigorate its relationships with regional allies and contribute to ending ongoing human suffering. While none of these objectives will be easy to meet, this paper's policy recommendations will aid U.S. policymakers and key regional players in thinking through their approach to stabilizing postwar Gaza.

Hamas's Early Years

Hamas was formally established in 1987 during the First Intifada (December 1987–September 1993) upon the publication of its charter, which vowed to use armed resistance to oppose the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, establish an Islamic Palestinian state across all modern-day Israeli land, and spoil efforts to negotiate peace, instead favoring “the banner of jihad.”¹⁷ The group was originally established as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood—a religious and political organization known for its charitable activity throughout the Arab world—but eventually distanced itself from the Brotherhood in 2017.¹⁸ Throughout the First Intifada, Hamas used stones, knives, and homemade explosives to carry out targeted attacks, protest Israeli occupation and counter Jewish settler expansion in the West Bank.¹⁹

In addition to waging an aggressive campaign of resistance against Israel, Hamas also funded a vast network of charities and social services in the West Bank and Gaza, aimed at entrenching its ideology in Palestinian civil society and attracting popular support for its use of violence. After the formation of the PA and the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the group targeted its outreach toward youth and those without access to social welfare, aiming to serve as a substitute for the weak and notoriously corrupt PA. Some of these social services included health care, financial assistance, policing, education, electricity, and public works.²⁰ These outreach activities—many of them connected to local schools, mosques, and other community spaces—had broad appeal to many Palestinians, particularly poor and underserved populations in the Gaza Strip.²¹

Hamas continued to grow in popularity in the years after Oslo, as it sought to directly confront what Palestinians saw as the PA's and the Palestine Liberation Organization's failures to secure statehood and to address decades of grievances against their Israeli neighbors. These frustrations prompted Hamas to boycott the first national Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections in 1996, attracting more supporters who disapproved of Oslo for either religious fundamentalist or nationalist reasons.²² However, as Hamas continued to gain political and military power during the Second Intifada, the group changed tactics and decided to run in the 2006 PLC elections as the Change and Reform party, winning 74 of the available 132 parliamentary seats and an overwhelming 44 percent of the popular vote.²³ Change and Reform joined the Fatah party in March 2007 in a fragile coalition government, which quickly broke down after just three months and ended with a five-day, Hamas-led coup that eventually forced Fatah and the PA from Gaza in June of that year.²⁴ Though negotiators have made several attempts to reconcile the two parties over the years, Palestinian governance today remains strictly divided between Hamas (Change and Reform) in Gaza City and the PA in Ramallah.

Hamas's Roots in Civil Society

The extent to which Hamas is interwoven into Gaza's civilian institutions means that any attempt to stabilize Gaza while dismantling the organization must address the various roles it currently fulfills. Hamas's strategy of building popular support from the ground up through a network of charity, education, and public health services—then *later* pivoting to politics—can be seen as a savvy form of



political advertising, designed to showcase to future voters the type of Palestinian state Hamas purports it will build upon its election.²⁵ This decision to provide social services to its constituent population serves a variety of purposes, chief among them for Hamas to demonstrate itself to be a qualified administrator capable of governing, not just spouting inflammatory rhetoric and setting off car bombs.²⁶ Hamas regularly engages in *dawa* (“invitation”) activities to spread Islamic values throughout society by running and maintaining mosques, providing social services, and collecting *zakaat*, or Islamic alms.²⁷

Hamas’s landslide 2006 electoral victory over the Fatah party was due largely to its prior support among fellow Palestinians, which was cultivated through networks of religious, social service, and charitable organizations that afforded it a strong base of support independent of the PA. It also campaigned on a platform of “good governance,” using its involvement in Palestinian civil society to argue that it would be able to govern and serve voters’ needs far more effectively than Fatah.²⁸ Hamas’s complete takeover of Gaza the following year was facilitated by its role as both a well-armed militia equipped with the firepower to physically oust Fatah from Gaza and as a welfare provider with the social capital required to attract popular endorsement for its actions.²⁹ After its expulsion from Gaza, the PA boycotted many Hamas organizations in the judicial, security, and economic sectors and—according to the International Crisis Group—inadvertently “created a vacuum [that] Hamas filled” with its own parallel governance and welfare institutions in Gaza.³⁰ Hamas’s reliance on these interconnected, local networks of support that were embedded in civilian Palestinian communities contributed to its long-term political survival in Gaza, despite a number of armed conflicts with Israeli forces in recent years and constant sparring with the PA over salaries and economic policy.³¹

Hamas went on to exert control over Gaza in ways more complex than simply holding territory and occupying parliamentary seats. It exercised significant influence over education in Gaza alongside the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), rewriting the textbooks and history taught to Palestinian children; maintained control of the local security service to enforce law; compelled its citizens to depend on Hamas-run health services; and co-opted civilian infrastructure to conceal tunnels, command centers, and weapons caches.³² The following section outlines how Hamas transformed the remnants of PA social services in Gaza into a comprehensive regime that compelled Gazans to become reliant on—and sometimes, though certainly not always, supportive of—a terrorist government. It examines the different ways Hamas embedded itself in everyday facets of Gazan society by appropriating preexisting structures of local governance, education, police, and health care.

GOVERNANCE AND IDEOLOGY

In its first year in government after Fatah’s expulsion from Gaza, Hamas invested significant resources in asserting a monopoly over the use of force in its territory, eliminating potential threats to its authority, and establishing a functioning government completely separate from that of the PA in Ramallah.³³ Hamas began by replacing all Fatah-affiliated leaders with its own officials and employing the levers of bureaucracy to embed its core ideas about religion, violence, land rights, and Palestinian state sovereignty into all layers of government.³⁴

Local municipalities—responsible for managing everyday life in Gaza—are central to Hamas’s efforts to embed its “culture of resistance” into even the most mundane sectors of Palestinian civil society.³⁵ These include the Gazan Ministries of Health, Education, and the Interior. After the 2007 coup, it was essential that Hamas authorities quickly assert and maintain control over these institutions, not only to establish a sense of order but to demonstrate to voters that they had made the right choice in voting Change and Reform at the ballot box and supporting the militants who pushed the PA out of Gaza. This process was not without its challenges, however. Hamas inherited a bureaucracy plagued by corruption and years of mismanagement by the PA.³⁶ This system also needed to meet the needs of roughly two

million inhabitants—most of whom were reliant on a combination of services previously provided by the UN, international NGOs, and the PA.

Though Hamas may have won the favor of many of Gaza’s voters, it also needed the backing of local clans to effectively exploit Gaza’s levers of governance. While many local tribes were not supportive of Hamas’s 2007 takeover, folding them into the Palestinian civil service allowed Hamas to buy the support of Gaza’s most powerful families for the low price of a steady salary.³⁷ Hamas employed tribal *mukhtars* (clan elders or headmen) to handle municipal and administrative tasks, acting as conduits between civilians and Hamas authorities.³⁸ While this tactic may have established a thin facade of popular representation, it also further bloated Gaza’s government and created a convenient means through which to punish or crack down on clan leaders who did not submit to Hamas’s demands. In 2011, Hamas made it mandatory for every Gazan family or tribe to be represented by a *mukhtar* as a means of minimizing the threat these clans posed to the group’s authority.³⁹

The new Hamas-led government co-opted two additional institutional structures that allowed it to weave extremist ideas into the fabric of Palestinian government. The first was a local branch of the *Rabitat al-Islami*, or the Muslim World League, which granted Hamas control over the territory’s judicial system and interpretation of *sharia* (Islamic law).⁴⁰ The second were the *zakat* (alms or charity) committees, established to collect and distribute obligatory Islamic alms to the poor, but which also padded Hamas coffers.⁴¹

These three institutions—tribal *mukhtar* intermediaries, Islamic judicial bodies, and local *zakat* committees—afforded the new Hamas authorities control over not just everyday bureaucratic institutions but also communication between civilians and their local representatives, the authorities trusted to interpret and apply the law, and the channels through which donations flowed to the territory’s poor—and often directly to Hamas itself.

Not only does ideology continue to play a central role in Hamas’s approach to governance, it serves as a structure upon which the group built a network of social services to endear itself to the population—a structure that has kept Hamas in power through four wars with Israel.⁴² Despite the near total destruction of Gaza’s physical infrastructure, some of these institutions still exist today—and could serve as a starting point for Hamas to revive its governance project in Gaza—if a robust civilian government is not established in its place and Trump’s 20-point plan is not implemented in full.

EDUCATION AND IDEOLOGY

The goal of Hamas’s educational *dawa* initiative, focused on “schools, campuses, and mosques—controlled environments where impressionable minds are formed,” is to teach Gazan children from their first days in the classroom to worship martyrs, demonize Israel, and aspire to carry out spectacular acts of violence.⁴³ A study examining the impact of Hamas’s 2007 takeover of education in Gaza found that Hamas indoctrinated Gazan children by rewriting approved PA curricula, segregating classrooms by gender beginning at age 9, and organizing extracurricular military training programs for teenage boys.⁴⁴ Hamas’s Ministry of Education introduced textbooks in Gazan high schools that exposed additional problems with Gaza’s education system: The books refer to the Jewish Torah and Talmud as “fabricated” texts, fail to mention the Oslo Peace Accords, and define Palestine as a Muslim state that includes all land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.⁴⁵

Due to the dire shortage of teachers after Fatah’s expulsion from Gaza, Hamas filled instructor vacancies with its own staff, taking the opportunity to introduce extremism into the curricula of young children. The group also sought to groom the next generation of militants by offering indoctrination programs for Gazan youth. In September 2012, Hamas began offering a militant training elective for high school boys known as the *Futuwwa* (literally “youth”); former Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh later described the first 3,600

graduates of this program as “the generation that will bring victory to its people and will liberate their land.”⁴⁶ In early 2024, Israeli President Isaac Herzog unveiled a classified document from the al-Qassam Brigades—Hamas’s military wing—outlining the group’s goals for summer camps it organized across Gaza to “promote the culture of resistance and the values of jihad among the children.”⁴⁷ According to the document, dated July 2023, camp activities included target practice and simulated terror attacks to prepare “children to serve the [Palestinian] resistance in the future.”⁴⁸ At these training camps—some of which were held in actual Hamas military installations—al-Qassam militants demonstrated the proper handling of mortars, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and automatic rifles, and led drills in both urban and tunnel warfare.⁴⁹ This type of training and indoctrination not only exposes children to extremism and violence from a very early age, but prepares them for future careers as militants or Hamas-affiliated police officers.⁵⁰

In addition to the education services that Hamas provides, UNRWA also plays a large role in the Palestinian education system, at one point running nearly 200 schools in Gaza alone. UNRWA was established in December 1949 with a mission to provide services to nearly six million registered Palestinian refugees, largely spread across Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.⁵¹ In addition to education, UNRWA ran 22 health centers, distributed thousands of microfinance loans, and coordinated the logistics of food and other aid distribution to Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank.⁵² Although UNRWA claims that its core principles are aimed solely at providing humanitarian services to Palestinian refugees, the organization has been accused multiple times of encouraging antisemitism, aiding Hamas, and allowing the terror organization to use and abuse its facilities.⁵³ A study by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-SE) found that some UNRWA textbooks actively misrepresent regional geography, glorify violence against Israelis, and praise extremism and martyrdom.⁵⁴ Former Hamas leader Haniyeh was an UNRWA teacher prior to taking a senior leadership role within Hamas.⁵⁵

These factors—and more recent examples—prompted Israel to ban UNRWA from operating in Israel beginning in January 2025. In early 2024, Israel published identifying information of 12 UNRWA staff members whom it accused of participating in atrocities on October 7, 2023. Nine of them were later fired.⁵⁶ This finding prompted Israeli policymakers to doubt UNRWA’s commitment to established humanitarian neutrality standards. It also played a critical role in Israel’s decision to restrict UNRWA from operating on its territory—and therefore also in Gaza, since one cannot access the enclave without crossing an Israeli-controlled checkpoint.⁵⁷ This decision had major implications for Gaza’s humanitarian situation as well as the future of its postwar education sector, as it will likely place a much greater burden on local and international NGOs (unaffiliated with the UN). In the future, one of two things is likely to happen: either Hamas will once again seek to play an outsized role in determining what and how Gazan children are taught, or a new window of opportunity will open, prompting systemic educational reform in postwar Gaza.

THE ENFORCERS: HAMAS’S POLICING IN GAZA

After its takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007, Hamas had to take on new responsibilities that stretched beyond its roots in charity and social outreach. However, it began thinking about issues such as security and crime during its 2005–2006 political campaign. Hamas’s Change and Reform platform prioritized “protecting the rule of law, maintaining order, and providing citizens with security without violating their constitutional rights”—goals second only to ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land.⁵⁸ The group took immediate steps to act on this commitment to law and order shortly after its military takeover of Gaza and the orchestrated collapse of the PA Security Forces (PASF) in Gaza; in June 2007, then-PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad ordered all PASF personnel not to show up to work in Gaza, in an effort to pressure Hamas back to the negotiating table.⁵⁹ Rather than pressing Hamas to reconcile with Fatah, this policy essentially created a state-sanctioned security vacuum in Gaza, which was quickly filled by

Hamas militants and a rapid-response, temporary Executive Force (EF, also known in Arabic as the *Tanfithiya*) largely made up of members of Hamas's military wing, the al-Qassam Brigades. The EF represented Hamas's shift from a small-scale militia to a governing body, as it formally established alternatives to PA institutions that had vacated Gaza City for Ramallah.⁶⁰

Within the first month of Hamas's coup and subsequent assumption of responsibility for security and public safety, this new EF adopted a "zero tolerance" approach to crime, leading to a significant drop in abductions, tribal and domestic violence, drug trafficking, and larceny.⁶¹ While the EF may have achieved moderate success in reducing violent crime, the true goal of the unit's crime-fighting efforts was to prove Hamas to be a capable governing body or, at bare minimum, a more competent one than the PA—seen by many at the time as a failed Palestinian state.⁶² Hamas officials understood that public perceptions of this new police force were critical to earning the legitimacy they needed to remain in power. By establishing and maintaining a monopoly over the use of violence in the territory it controlled, Hamas was able to quickly shut down any opposition to its rule from Fatah and rival militant groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).⁶³ According to Middle East scholar Beverley Milton-Edwards, this combined with the overall improvement in security highlighted the success of the EF as

... the instrument of Hamas-in-government rather than Hamas-the-organization, thereby demonstrating to Gazans that it was capable of such a transition to central authority and power over all the [Gazan] people and not just its supporters.⁶⁴

During this period of transition, international monitors paid careful attention to the ways in which Hamas enforced the law and treated those it viewed as offenders. Amnesty International documented human rights violations Hamas police forces committed against individuals who were viewed as threats to the group's authority during its early years in power. These crimes included "abductions, deliberate and unlawful killings, torture, and death threats against those they [Hamas police officers] accuse of 'collaborating' with Israel" during and in the immediate aftermath of Israel's Operation Cast Lead (December 2008–January 2009).⁶⁵

Hamas stands accused of many similar offenses today. As it cracked down on rival Gazan clans in the days following the October 2025 ceasefire, it went as far as beating and executing men in the streets of Gaza City.⁶⁶ The group is attempting the same strategy today as it did in 2007, and it will succeed unless Washington and its international partners can quickly organize a stabilization force to provide security to Gaza.

By quickly establishing, then maintaining, control over security in Gaza after its June 2007 takeover, Hamas's EF and the al-Qassam Brigades cemented the group's physical control over Gaza's residents. Hamas's security apparatus not only carried out everyday law enforcement responsibilities but also attracted favor from locals who saw Hamas's rendition of public safety as more effective and less corrupt than that of the PA.⁶⁷ Hamas would continue to cultivate this sense of dependence by transforming Gaza's health care sector.

HAMAS HEALTH CARE

After Hamas seized control of Gaza, it immediately became responsible for the health care of 1.6 million Palestinians, which it viewed as an opportunity to demonstrate "practical governance and [ensure] political survival."⁶⁸ The group attempted to restructure the Ministry of Health to address the PA's rampant corruption and chronic mismanagement, demonstrating a supposed desire to place the needs of its citizens at the forefront of its policymaking.⁶⁹ While these institutional changes may have made it

easier for Palestinians to access some health care services in Gaza, it also forced citizens who had no desire to interact with Hamas to do so if they wanted to receive medical care or visit a dying loved one.⁷⁰ Hamas could and would later turn to this increasingly indebted pool of civilians to recruit patients and local health care workers to participate in or enable the group's terrorist plots.⁷¹ In addition to recruiting people, Hamas also took advantage of places—using the health care infrastructure it worked so hard to build and maintain to conceal its militant activities.⁷²

The past two years of conflict in Gaza underscore the extent to which Hamas abuses civilian infrastructure—including hospitals and clinics—to store weapons caches, conceal tunnels, and disguise command centers.⁷³ Israeli military activity in and around Gaza's battered health care system has caused significant controversy but highlights the measures Hamas leadership has taken to surround its fighters with a dense perimeter of human shields, risking civilian lives and abusing infrastructure that is typically protected under international humanitarian law.⁷⁴ Captured Hamas terrorists have confirmed in interrogations that the group regularly kidnaps and plants civilians in and around hospitals to prevent strikes on key Hamas tunnels, noting that the group's use of human shields is part of its "core strategy."⁷⁵ In one interrogation video that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) released in late October 2023, Hamas operative Amar Sammy Marzuk Abu A'yoah describes the group's decision to hide weapons, medical equipment, and supplies underneath Gaza City's al-Shifa Hospital, noting that "Shifa [Hospital] is a safe place, it will not be struck [by the IDF]."⁷⁶

Hamas believes it can deter the IDF from striking critical infrastructure because Israel and the international community had placed a premium on minimizing civilian casualties prior to October 7th.⁷⁷ On the flip side, in the event of an Israeli strike on a hospital or school, Hamas can then blame high civilian deaths on the IDF rather than on its failure to protect its fellow Palestinians.⁷⁸ While it may have contributed to the creation of a health care system that served Palestinians' basic needs, Hamas also used that same system against innocent civilians by placing them in harm's way.

Polling Palestinians: What We Know (and Do Not Know) About Palestinian Public Opinion

Just as important as identifying and analyzing the policy options available for postwar Gaza is understanding how Palestinians want to see their government structured after the war. As the world reacted to the horrific events of October 7, 2023, many mistakenly made the assumption that "all Palestinians support Hamas," arguing that because the group won a majority of seats in the territory's last election, it must continue to represent a majority of Gazan public opinion.⁷⁹ This section sets out to disprove that argument, shed a light on what we *do* know about current political discourse in Gaza, and analyze potential implications of those findings for postwar planning.

Methodology

It is not possible for polling to fully capture the views of an entire society on a particular issue—especially when conducted in an active war zone. This section relies heavily on publicly available polling conducted and analyzed by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) in the Gaza Strip. The findings of five surveys conducted in March, June, and September 2024, as well as in May and October 2025, are highlighted. The data frame the conversation surrounding what is currently known—and, in many cases, unknown—about Palestinian sentiment toward Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA), as well as general attitudes on how Gaza should be governed after the war.

An important disclaimer: Though Hamas attempted to misrepresent the PCPSR survey results, the authors of this report have carefully reviewed primary source documents and determined that the original PCPSR polling is methodologically sound. On August 29, 2024, the IDF publicized documents found in a Hamas tunnel underneath the Gaza Strip that purportedly detailed a Hamas plot to manipulate the results of public opinion surveys conducted by the PCPSR. The documents implied that Hamas falsified polling data for the PCPSR's March 2024 survey (Public Opinion Poll No. 91), artificially boosting support for Hamas leaders and armed resistance to Israeli occupation. The PCPSR addressed these claims in the methodology section of its subsequent survey (Public Opinion Poll No. 93), confirming that the original survey data was not manipulated and that Hamas attempted to falsify the results after the fact.

After conducting a thorough analysis of the original Arabic primary source documents and comparing them with the documents the IDF uncovered, the authors of this paper concur with the PCPSR's findings, noting that the documents released by the IDF contained typos, copy-paste errors, and other flaws indicative of forgery and intentional deception. Hamas likely attempted to misrepresent and inflate data that had already been collected by PCPSR for its March 2024 poll, to mislead the world into thinking it had much greater support among Gazans for its actions on October 7, 2023, as well as its continued control of the Gaza Strip—then planted those falsified documents in a tunnel for the IDF to find. Subsequent PCPSR surveys included a more detailed methodological section to assuage any fears of data manipulation or falsification.

This section of the report cites two additional main sources: (1) 2006 census data from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, collected before Hamas seized control of Gaza in June the following year, and (2) official results of the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections, collected by the Central Elections Commission Palestine. These data provide context about the voting-age population of Gaza in 2006, as well as the breakdown of election results by party and voter demographics.

The 2006 PLC election results can no longer be considered representative of a population that has grown by more than 45 percent in the intervening years.⁸⁰ Since 2006, the population of the Gaza Strip has increased by more than 670,000 people.⁸¹ In the 19 years since the last round of PLC elections, more than 718,000 children living in Gaza have since come of age, meaning that at least 1.3 million of the enclave's 2.1 million residents played little to no role in Hamas's 2006 electoral victory.⁸² This figure is by no means an exact calculation, as it does not take into account average annual birth and death rates, conflict fatalities, and migration figures. Yet the fact that nearly two-thirds of the enclave's current population either was not alive in 2006 or is not old enough to have ever voted in a Palestinian election recolors the discussion on Palestinian support for Hamas.

The 2006 election had a remarkably good turnout—an average of 80.7 percent across Gaza. However, it should be noted that the territory’s median age at the time was just 15.5 years, meaning that the eligible voters represented only 52.2 percent of its residents (for reference, the 2006 U.S. voting population accounted for 75.3 percent of Americans).⁸³ Hamas’s Change and Reform party won 74 of the available 132 parliamentary seats, elected by 44 percent of voters in Gaza.⁸⁴ After a U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations delegation visit to the Palestinian territories after the 2006 election, a staff trip report described Hamas’s victory as the result of a “protest vote against the corruption and incompetence of the long ruling Fatah party.”⁸⁵ Many Gazans who voted for the Change and Reform party did so not because they believed in the party’s ideology, but because they hoped Hamas would be even a *marginal* improvement over the PA. While 46.2 percent of *voting-age* Gazans voted for Hamas in 2006, the 193,002 Palestinians who voted for Change and Reform represented just 13.12 percent of Gaza’s total population at the time.⁸⁶ Gaza has significantly changed since 2006. In nearly 20 years, no elections were held, the territory’s leaders faced zero accountability for their actions, and those who have never had the opportunity to vote have had no means to voice their political grievances.

In recent years, as humanitarian conditions have worsened and the civilian death toll has risen, support for Hamas among Gazans has plummeted. According to the PCPSR’s September 2024 poll results, a little more than one-third of Gazans preferred that Hamas return to power after the war, down from 46 percent three months earlier.⁸⁷ Overall satisfaction with Hamas’s performance in the current war with Israel dropped from 64 percent in June 2024 to 43 percent in May 2025. This may indicate that whatever favor Hamas won among Gazans in the immediate aftermath of October 7 began to fade as the conflict dragged on, living conditions worsened, and civilian casualties rose.⁸⁸

This shift in public sentiment resulted in a series of rare public demonstrations against Hamas across the Gaza Strip beginning on March 25, 2025. In protests across Gaza City, Khan Younis, and Beit Lahiya, thousands of protesters chanted slogans, including “Hamas is terrorism,” “Hamas get out,” and “The people want the end of Hamas.”⁸⁹ Hamas leaders took notice of the demonstrations, but blamed them on the Israeli government and condemned those who took part.⁹⁰ Those who participated in the first major protests against Hamas since October 7, 2023, did not do so without risk. After 22-year-old Uday Rabie participated in a protest in Gaza City, dozens of al-Qassam members kidnapped and tortured him; he died of his injuries shortly after being returned to his family.⁹¹ The militants who took Uday back to his family left them with a warning: “This is the fate of all who insult the al-Qassam Brigades and speak ill of [them].”⁹² Following the October 2025 ceasefire, Hamas began targeting Gazans using similar levels of extreme violence in an attempt to reassert power, prompting fears of an internal civil war.⁹³ Despite this crackdown, when Gazans were polled following the start of the October 2025 ceasefire, support for the group’s performance during the war had risen by eight percentage points—though it should be noted that overall approval ratings for Fatah, the PA, and PA President Mahmoud Abbas also rose by similar percentages.⁹⁴

The May 2025 poll also asked residents for their thoughts on the release of hostages and Hamas’s disarmament: 33 percent of Gazans support Hamas’s disarmament in order to end the current conflict, but a majority believe that even if Hamas releases all Israeli hostages and disarms, Israel will remain in Gaza and the war will continue. This trend continued into October 2025, when only a slim majority—54 percent—of Gazans noted their trust in Trump’s plan to bring about a permanent end to the war.⁹⁵ However, once the ceasefire began, public opinion about Hamas’s disarmament continued to be a decisive issue; Trump’s plan—and its Arab security force in particular—was much less likely to gain support from Gazans and West Bank residents when disarmament was listed as a critical component of postwar governance and reconstruction efforts.⁹⁶

The PCPSR sums up this trend concisely: “Across both [the West Bank and Gaza], skepticism of external plans coexists with demands for elections and self-defense.”⁹⁷ Though Hamas maintains some level of consistent support across both Gaza and the West Bank (more so in the latter), Palestinians consistently express dissatisfaction with all existing political alternatives to the status quo and likely fear that change will lead to permanent Israeli or foreign occupation.⁹⁸ When asked in October 2025 to choose a new president from a number of fictitious election scenarios, just over one-third of Palestinians consistently chose a Hamas candidate, regardless of the number of additional opponents or their political affiliations.⁹⁹ This result is consistent with polling conducted prior to the war in September 2023, but down from a high of 48 percent in March 2024.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, Palestinians do not feel confident that the PA, in its existing form and with its current leadership, can successfully govern.¹⁰¹ While there is much debate among Palestinians about the political path forward, polling across the West Bank and Gaza—both before and after October 7—has shown marked consistency on one sentiment: Mahmoud Abbas should resign. As of October 2025, support for Abbas’s resignation averaged 80 percent across both Palestinian territories.¹⁰²

The future of Gaza and the West Bank lies not in a corrupt generation of Palestinian leadership nor in a terrorist organization, but in the large faction of Gazans who support *any party* that is not Hamas. Perhaps the most revealing questions in the PCPSR’s surveys ask Gazans to indicate which political party from the 2006 PLC election ticket they would vote for if all factions agreed to hold new elections today. In October 2025, 23 percent of respondents selected Fatah, 35 percent chose Change and Reform, and a significant number—42 percent—of Gazans responded that they supported third parties, supported none of the parties listed on the 2006 ticket, or would choose not to participate in elections given the options on the ballot.¹⁰³ Palestinians are fed up with Hamas, which willingly sacrifices “the blood of women, children, and [the] elderly” in its quest to destroy Israel.¹⁰⁴ However, Palestinians are also unhappy with current PA leadership and the absence of representative government in Gaza and the West Bank.

No proposal for governance in postwar Gaza will ever be perfect—all will contain flaws and concessions unpalatable to Israelis, Americans, and Palestinians alike. However, for U.S. policymakers, implementing the only viable plan on the table is nonnegotiable; failing to do so is akin to giving the green light to a long-term insurgency or continued Hamas presence in Gaza.¹⁰⁵ U.S. negotiators must keep a few principles in mind when operationalizing Trump’s plan: (1) All parties must commit to a lasting, permanent ceasefire; (2) the United States and its Arab partners should lead a multinational stabilization and peacekeeping mission in Gaza by invitation of the PA; and (3) governance in Gaza moving forward should be a Palestinian-led effort, but one that excludes extremist voices like those of Hamas, the PIJ, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.¹⁰⁶ The following section lays out policy recommendations for U.S. negotiators to incorporate into postconflict governance planning to ensure that Hamas has no future role in Gaza.¹⁰⁷

Key Components for a Stable Postwar Gaza

The following policy suggestions argue that by crowding out Hamas—which, after two years of conflict, still retains some of its former capacity to govern—more moderate voices can first stabilize Gaza and later succeed in steering Palestinians away from institutions built on a foundation of hatred and extremism. This section outlines recommendations that policymakers should prioritize in the short and long term to address root causes of radicalization and uproot Hamas’s hold on Palestinian civil society. Postwar governance and stabilization efforts should focus on replacing Hamas’s social service

infrastructure and governing institutions with a capable, civilian alternative made up of a new generation of political leaders who are motivated to reform and rebuild the Palestinian governance project.

The goal of the long-term U.S. policy for Gaza is to enable Palestinian self-governance and self-sufficiency absent Hamas, thus ensuring Israeli and Palestinian security and an end to decades-long cycles of violence and disenfranchisement. These recommendations focus on reforming the PA so that a civilian administration can take Hamas's place in Gaza and a capable, well-equipped PASF can effectively counter and disrupt whatever militant presence remains. Despite Israeli assertions that the PA should not be responsible for the day after in Gaza, advocating for a postwar governance strategy in which the PA does not play a role would require rebuilding all Palestinian governance institutions from the ground up. That process would be far too time and resource intensive to effectively address the immediate and ever-changing challenges of present-day Gaza. Trump's recent Gaza peace plan acknowledges this—placing Gaza in the hands of an “apolitical Palestinian committee” while the PA undergoes a series of reforms.¹⁰⁸

The following recommendations aim to ensure that Trump's plan achieves its stated goals—ending fighting between Israel and Hamas and creating space for Gaza's physical and political reconstruction. Doing so will require a long-term commitment by all parties to a lasting ceasefire, followed by swift action from negotiators to organize an Interim Security Force and a “technocratic, apolitical Palestinian committee” to oversee the day-to-day functioning of Gaza. Washington and its regional allies will continue to be key to facilitating this agreement and bringing about a permanent end to this war.

COMMIT TO A LASTING CEASEFIRE

Recommendations for U.S. policymakers:

- Continue to play an active role in mediating talks between Israel and Hamas alongside other partner countries (e.g., Egypt and Qatar). Assist in deconfliction when parties accuse one another of ceasefire violations.
- Leverage the relationship the United States has with Israel to pressure Netanyahu into committing to a durable ceasefire and implementing all points of Trump's framework.

No long-term, postwar governance or reconstruction plan for Gaza will be successful—or possible—without Israel and Hamas committing to a permanent ceasefire. Phase one of Trump's 2025 peace plan saw both parties agree to a ceasefire, the exchange of all living Israeli hostages for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners, and the withdrawal of Israeli troops to an agreed-upon “Yellow Line” inside Gaza.¹⁰⁹ As of the publication of this report, the ceasefire continues to hold, though there have been multiple violations by both sides.¹¹⁰

According to point 15 of Trump's plan, “The United States will work with Arab and international partners to develop a temporary International Stabilization Force (ISF) to immediately deploy in Gaza.”¹¹¹ The ISF's job will be to provide security, prevent smuggling efforts, train the PASF, and establish a “deconfliction mechanism” to address ceasefire violations. So far, negotiators have not formed or deployed the ISF, nor have they established a formal deconfliction mechanism, risking the integrity of the ceasefire when violations inevitably occur.¹¹² U.S. policymakers should learn lessons from the collapse of the previous Gaza ceasefire on March 18, 2025, after negotiators failed to agree on conditions that would see a permanent end to the war and organize a postwar government.¹¹³ While these issues are inevitably the hardest to solve, a ceasefire will not hold in the long term if these questions go unanswered.

Additionally, Trump's plan calls for Hamas to willingly give up its weapons and not pursue rearmament in the future.¹¹⁴ However, after signing onto phase one of Trump's plan, Hamas and PIJ leadership issued statements contrary to the text of the peace plan, arguing that "The [Palestinian] resistance has not been defeated and will not be disarmed."¹¹⁵ Gaza's demilitarization will significantly reduce the threat that Hamas poses to Israel, as well as the Palestinian citizens it claims to represent.¹¹⁶ Israeli leadership also indicated that disarmament is a crucial step toward ending the war and permitting a full Israeli troop withdrawal from Gaza.¹¹⁷

By design, a postwar plan will require compromises from all parties involved, and no proposal can address every root cause of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. However, taking advantage of the momentum from Trump's framework is imperative to making progress, solving persistent security challenges, and addressing Gaza's ongoing humanitarian emergency.

ESTABLISH INTERIM GOVERNANCE AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT AUTHORITIES

Recommendations for U.S. policymakers:

- Open a dialogue with Ramallah to plan for comprehensive PA reform and future PLC elections.
- Encourage U.S. regional partners—such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Turkey, and Abraham Accords countries—to contribute forces and financial support to the ISF, supported by U.S. funding and American military advisors based in Israel.
- Provide training to the PASF in the West Bank or at U.S. military installations in the region to professionalize the Palestinian police force and equip it with the resources needed to effectively maintain peace in Gaza and counter Hamas's criminal behavior.

Since October 7, 2023, the IDF has demonstrated remarkable success in significantly degrading Hamas's military capabilities. However, flare-ups of violence immediately following the October 2025 ceasefire demonstrate that the massive power vacuum in Gaza must immediately be filled—lest Hamas or a far more destabilizing actor take its place.¹¹⁸ In order to facilitate as peaceful a postwar transition as possible, Trump's peace plan calls for two oversight bodies to step in and conduct peacekeeping duties, organize aid, arrange basic services, and serve as the interim government while the PA undergoes reforms.

According to the peace deal, a "temporary International Stabilization Force" will train and assist Palestinian police in Gaza, serving as a "long-term internal security solution."¹¹⁹ Its role will be to monitor the terms of the ceasefire deal, prevent arms smuggling efforts, and secure goods and aid entering the enclave. As of the publication of this report, this force has yet to be established, resulting in Hamas police forces out in the open on Gazan streets reasserting authority and cracking down on perceived collaborators.¹²⁰ However, on November 17, 2025, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 2803, which supports Trump's comprehensive plan and authorizes member states working with the Board of Peace to establish a temporary ISF.¹²¹

Upon its entry into Gaza, the ISF's goal will be to provide security on the ground while monitoring the terms of a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. It will also play a role in meeting the Gazan population's basic needs—food, clean water, shelter, and medical care—by "facilitat[ing] the rapid and secure flow of goods to rebuild and revitalize Gaza."¹²² In the short term, all displaced civilians need immediate access to emergency shelters and essential services before officials can begin to expect their participation in elections, government reform, or other political processes.¹²³ The Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, the United Nations, and a number of international aid organizations have thus far played essential roles in facilitating the delivery of critical humanitarian supplies into Gaza, but the

situation remains dire.¹²⁴ By assuming responsibility for securing aid convoys and allowing NGOs unrestricted access to civilian areas, the ISF will not only relieve human suffering but also occupy space currently controlled by Hamas and local criminal gangs. This will significantly reduce the ability of would-be spoilers to loot aid and extort locals.¹²⁵ The aim of this stabilization mission is not to govern, but rather to restore a sense of order on the ground and facilitate delivery of basic services, thus affording Palestinians the opportunity to recover and take steps toward self-governance.

Now that Trump's plan has received backing from the UNSC, U.S. negotiators need to work quickly to establish protocols for ISF operations. Washington must achieve buy-in from partners and assuage participating coalition countries' fears of being perceived as illegal invaders or occupiers of Palestinian land. To aid in this goal, the ISF should be invited into Gaza by the PA so it is seen as a legitimate authority by the Palestinian civilians it would safeguard. Without this essential permission from the PA, any Arab partners who contribute forces to the mission will likely fear being viewed as "riding into Palestinian land on the backs of Israeli tanks."¹²⁶ Additionally, American negotiators must succeed in convincing Israel that having the PA involved in postwar Gaza is vital to long-term prospects for peace.¹²⁷

The ISF will also eventually oversee a gradual, time-bound, and benchmarked withdrawal of the IDF from Gaza following Hamas's disarmament—with the assumption that security will eventually become the sole responsibility of the PA.¹²⁸ According to Trump's plan, the ISF will also oversee Hamas's disarmament—a key step prior to IDF withdrawal—but a formal plan for this process has yet to be drafted.

As important as self-governance is to any future hopes of a stable Gaza, the key to accomplishing this goal is reform of the PA. Today, the PA is plagued by endemic corruption, chronic cronyism, and overall malaise after failing for decades to achieve its goal of an independent Palestinian state. In its current form, the PA—led by its 90-year-old president, Abbas—is incapable of governing effectively in the West Bank, let alone in postwar Gaza. The reform process is essential to restoring Palestinians' faith in their government and creating a civilian-led governance structure capable of replacing Hamas institutions. The United States can support PA reform by encouraging international dialogue that facilitates generational transition in Palestinian leadership and creates pathways for broader political participation.¹²⁹ For PA reform to be successful:

1. The United States must continue convincing Israel that having a reformed, moderate PA govern Gaza and the West Bank is in Israel's best interest. Without a reformed PA presence in Gaza, the territory is likely to face one of various grim futures—Hamas continues to rule Gaza as a terrorist state, Gaza becomes a permanent un- or undergoverned society, or Gaza falls under Israeli occupation once again. Any postwar governance plan that results in anyone other than Palestinians governing Gaza and the West Bank will only fuel ongoing cycles of violence, distrust, and disenfranchisement.
2. The PA must receive significant financial support from its Arab allies, the United States, and other partners to assist with paying salaries, backing humanitarian efforts in the Gaza Strip, and attracting investment for infrastructure and development projects in the West Bank and Gaza.
3. Reforms to the PA must solicit the voices of unrepresented Palestinians, many of whom have never been alive for a PLC election or were too young to vote in 2006.
4. The reform process must be as financially transparent as possible to combat corruption and rebuild public trust in governance institutions.

Reform takes time. There should be no expectation that the PA can simultaneously undergo significant structural change, coordinate postwar reconstruction and humanitarian relief for 2.1 million Gazans, and quell escalating tensions in the West Bank. Point nine of Trump’s plan calls for the PA to complete a “reform program” before it can take over from the two temporary governing bodies established under the deal: a “technocratic, apolitical Palestinian committee” and an advisory “Board of Peace” chaired by Trump.¹³⁰ The Palestinian body of this interim government will oversee day-to-day operations in postwar Gaza with oversight from the Board of Peace, which will largely handle fundraising and development. Establishing these bodies as quickly as possible is key to making certain that Hamas does not have the opportunity to regroup and assert control over the remnants of its former institutions and state-sanctioned power centers.

Additionally, PA reform should begin as soon as possible. The quicker a functioning political system is reconstructed, the quicker the PA can begin to guide the West Bank and the Gaza Strip toward unified Palestinian self-governance—highlighted as “the most vital Palestinian goal” in a September 2024 poll.¹³¹ Without PA reforms, any effort to rebuild social services and critical infrastructure will be for naught; these reforms will provide avenues for Palestinians to have an impact on policy and significantly reduce extremism’s impact on their communities.

REBUILD SOCIAL SERVICES AND CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

By reshaping health care, education, policing, and local governance in Gaza, authorities can replace services formerly controlled by Hamas with those run by the PA, thus rebuilding trust and attracting political support for a more moderate Palestinian government. Reconstructing Gaza’s social services and critical infrastructure is a vital pillar of any successful long-term plan; it allows authorities to meet civilians’ basic needs while also constructing a government without Hamas’s influence. In addition to a significant intellectual and financial investment in Palestinian institutions, postwar Gaza will require a herculean effort to render the territory habitable again. According to a September 2024 UN satellite analysis, Israeli bombing has left an estimated 50 million tons of rubble—likely burying more than 10,000 additional bodies—with officials estimating that the cleanup alone could take more than two decades and cost as much as \$1.2 billion.¹³² While the PA undergoes significant and substantial internal reforms, the interim Palestinian governing authority—in collaboration with local laborers and an ISF equipped with funding from international partners—will begin to clear rubble, rebuild critical infrastructure, and safely remove explosive ordnance.¹³³ The sooner this process begins, the sooner Palestinian authorities can begin to rebuild the local economy and shift their attention to reforming the institutions that allowed Hamas to cement itself so firmly in Gazan society.

Health Care

Recommendations for U.S. policymakers:

- Allocate funding for American NGOs—such as AmeriCares, Doctors Without Borders USA, and the American Red Cross—to send medically trained staff members (such as nurses, doctors, surgeons, and physical therapists) into Gaza to provide essential medical care and establish field hospitals.
- Advocate for a significant increase in the quantity of medical aid—including fuel for hospital generators—to be included in postceasefire aid shipments. Medical aid should also prioritize supplies that are key to famine/malnutrition response—including feeding tubes, intravenous (IV) supplies, ready-to-use therapeutic food (or RUTF), and key electrolyte supplements such as potassium.

Beyond addressing the immediate needs of the tens of thousands of Gazans injured in the recent conflict, the PA must reconstruct Gaza's health care infrastructure with the goal of replacing Hamas's services with better health care run by the PA's Ministry of Health. This will eliminate Gazans' dependence on Hamas institutions for everyday care and emergency medicine. In addition to the 10 or so international hospitals currently in Gaza—not all of which are operational—and the already significant medical NGO presence throughout the territory, Gaza will require major international investment to rebuild its health care sector. Experts assess that it will take “at least ten years and \$15 billion to rebuild the [health care] infrastructure damaged during the current war,” not to mention additional years to replace the specialized knowledge of the hundreds of medical professionals who were killed in the conflict.¹³⁴ In the meantime, countries participating in reconstruction efforts should continue to rely on and expand existing field hospitals to provide critical health care services in the absence of permanent infrastructure.¹³⁵ Efforts to plug the wartime “brain drain” will benefit from assistance from health care workers, mental health specialists, and NGOs based in the West Bank and Palestinian diaspora communities. This will in turn empower civil society to rebuild bridges between the two Palestinian territories by working toward a shared humanitarian goal.

While the technocratic committee oversees efforts to restore basic health care services to Gaza, the PASF and ISF will need to work together to rid Gaza's health care infrastructure of military installations and weapons caches. Hamas uses many of Gaza's existing hospitals, including al-Shifa, and surrounding civilian architecture as cover to smuggle weapons in ambulances, hide rockets in tunnels, and even to hold hostages underground.¹³⁶ This in turn results in Israeli airstrikes and raids on much of Gaza's already failing health infrastructure *and* places civilians seeking health care at significant risk of being injured or killed in the cross fire. For postwar Gaza's health care system to function effectively and safely, it must not only be reconstructed but also demilitarized so that it can serve Gaza's civilians rather than its militants.

Education

Recommendation for U.S. policymakers:

- Reallocate federal funding previously earmarked for UNRWA education programs and allow at least a portion of it to be used by other UN agencies—or nonprofits such as Anera and Save the Children—to establish temporary learning spaces in Gaza's tent camps for displaced children until existing schools can be repaired or rebuilt.

Like many of Gaza's other social service sectors, its educational infrastructure requires significant funds and intellectual capital to replace a system previously shaped by Hamas ideology with one that teaches tolerance and discourages extremist behavior. First, there must be safe and secure schools in which to hold classes—schools that are not used by terrorist groups to conceal underground tunnel entrances or hide weapon caches. While permanent infrastructure is reconstructed and schools that are still standing are transitioned from internally displaced persons shelters back to classrooms, the ISF should work with local NGOs to establish temporary education programs in shelters and tent camps. Quickly reestablishing educational programs for Palestinian children will act as a necessary distraction from the constant reminders of war and provide avenues for youth engagement. Additionally, given the Israeli ban on UNRWA operations, teachers and NGOs should prioritize teaching a curriculum devoid of antisemitism and extremism, instead focusing on tolerance and critical thinking. Knowing that the absence of UNRWA could potentially lead to an increase in Hamas-run schools, authorities must also eliminate avenues that Hamas recruiters use to indoctrinate children, including youth summer camps and military training programs for teenage boys.

Police Force

Recommendation for U.S. policymakers:

- Use U.S. military advisors based at Central Command's Civil-Military Coordination Center in Israel to organize and fund retraining programs for the PASF, facilitated by ISF partners.¹³⁷

The PASF will require significant international investment in training, equipment, and facilities to meet the security challenges of present-day Gaza if the PASF is to assume responsibility for law enforcement at the end of the ISF's mission. The PASF today is "chronically underfunded . . . widely unpopular, [and] ill-equipped" to handle security in the West Bank, let alone the high-risk situation in Gaza.¹³⁸ By participating in retraining programs led by ISF forces—primarily Egypt and Jordan—early on in the reconstruction process, the PASF can focus on reform and capacity-building before it becomes solely responsible for Palestinian security.¹³⁹ The goal of targeted training opportunities led by partner countries should be to produce a force capable of carrying out effective law enforcement and engaging in counterterrorism operations while respecting internationally recognized principles of human rights. While it is unlikely that the PASF will succeed without international backing, building a Palestinian law enforcement body with the ability to secure aid, handle local disputes, and detain suspects engaged in terrorism not only benefits Palestinian civilians but also relieves Israeli forces of the dangerous and costly burden of patrolling Gaza.

Local Governance

Recommendations for U.S. policymakers:

- Stress to Israeli leaders the importance of Palestinian self-governance, as well as the benefits for Israeli and Palestinian security.
- Convene an advisory group made up of American government officials, members of the Palestinian diaspora, and partner countries that are active participants in the ISF to make recommendations and provide expertise to the new Palestinian administration on the ground.

While the IDF has made significant progress in degrading Hamas's military capabilities, it has not yet succeeded in eliminating the group's political power. To disrupt Hamas's control over Gazan institutions, Gaza's government must be restructured, this time as an arm of the PA rather than an extension of Hamas. This process begins with reforming the traditional *mukhtar* system, formerly used as an intermediary between civilians and Hamas officials, to create avenues for Gazan youth to participate in local governance. Appointing reformed PA affiliates to positions in local government and providing formerly unrepresented Gazans with the opportunity to engage in civic participation are paramount to creating the next generation of leaders who represent a moderate, self-governed Palestinian state. Establishing a functioning judiciary—and thus the ability to enforce laws and policies in the West Bank and Gaza—is central to shifting power away from extremist groups and into the hands of the reformed PA. Creating a functioning judiciary body that can handle cases fairly and free of corruption provides Palestinians with a productive way to engage with their government—which they can hopefully trust to restore and maintain law and order.

HOLD PLC ELECTIONS

Recommendations for U.S. policymakers:

- Work with partners in the region to persuade Abbas to hold new PLC elections, in addition to elections for the Palestinian National Council (PNC), a body that represents Palestinians globally.
- Support Palestinian-led efforts to organize credible elections by contributing American observers to Gaza and the West Bank to participate in a multinational election monitoring mission during the next PLC election.
- Conduct outreach with Palestinian political groups, diaspora communities, and NGOs to encourage dialogue and creative problem-solving.

While PLC elections are crucial to revitalizing the Palestinian governance project and filling the political vacuum occupied by Hamas, elections can only take place after a significant and sustained humanitarian effort has been organized, reconstruction has begun, and PA reform has taken place. Elections are last on this list of policy recommendations because political reform and civic participation cannot take place unless Gaza also has robust state institutions, a professional security service, a functional judiciary, and adequate humanitarian services.

While organizing reconstruction, government reforms, and elections at the same time is a significant undertaking, setting a political process in motion is key for Palestinians to know that their voices are being heard and change is being made. For elections to be successful, under no circumstances can Hamas be allowed to run for office. This matter is articulated clearly in point 15 of Trump's plan, which states: "Hamas and other factions agree to not have any role in the governance of Gaza, directly, indirectly, or in any form."¹⁴⁰ If Hamas is allowed to put forth candidates in future elections, it may take that as an opportunity to regain power without taking full responsibility for governance, similar to Hezbollah's approach to shadow governance in Lebanon.¹⁴¹

It is worth noting that on July 19, 2025, Abbas announced that he intends to hold PNC elections before the end of the year. There have been no PNC elections since the body's formation in 1964.¹⁴² Since the PNC is the legislative body of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, a political Palestinian nationalist umbrella organization, this move would not result in a new president or prime minister, but it does signal an acknowledgment by Ramallah that change is necessary for the Palestinian governance project to succeed. However, American and regional policymakers involved in postwar Gaza talks must push Abbas to call for a new round of PLC elections, as well.

Creating a representative system does not happen overnight, but elections provide a key opportunity for the reformed PA to make significant steps toward transparency and legitimacy, supported by the transitional government in Gaza and the Board of Peace. The PA should also invite a delegation of nonpartisan, international election monitors to ensure the voting process is free and fair. Elections will be instrumental to ensuring that Hamas has no official role in—and much less influence on—postwar Gaza's government and civil society.

Conclusion

While a central goal of the Trump peace plan is Hamas's demilitarization, the group is still likely to have a significant impact on Gaza in the coming years, especially if postwar planning does not take active steps to counter it. Hamas plays such an outsized role in Gaza today because it not only possesses a significant amount of physical control and military power but also continues to accrue and draw on social capital for support. It earned this positive reputation in part by providing social services to Gazans, often allowing them access to networks of welfare support through health care and charitable

organizations that they did not have access to when Gaza was controlled by the PA. To significantly reduce the impact that Hamas will have on postwar Gaza, U.S. policymakers must focus their diplomatic efforts on implementing all phases of the current peace plan, coordinating the logistics of a humanitarian aid response, and partnering with Palestinian and regional partners to reform the PA and invest in capacity-building measures.

Policymakers should be formulating a long-term plan for Gaza's governance and reconstruction now, as swift action significantly increases the odds that a postwar strategy can effectively curtail Hamas's ability to directly or indirectly exert excess influence on the Palestinian territory. Negotiators have been unable to reach a consensus on what postwar Gaza should look like—as well as the best way to go about reaching that goal. Despite this, the United States, other allies, and former members of Netanyahu's coalition have been insisting since the very beginning of the war that a failure to proactively think through questions of humanitarian aid logistics, economic recovery, law enforcement, and governance will only create more complex security issues down the road. This paper argues that thinking about a long-term plan is crucial to ending the ongoing conflict for good, pursuing forward-thinking solutions to existing drivers of violence, and significantly limiting the impact Hamas can have on postwar Gaza.

Relief efforts should first focus on the immediate humanitarian needs of Gaza's 2.1 million residents before shifting to reconstruction efforts. This process should be facilitated by the ISF proposed in the U.S. plan, whose goals will be twofold: (1) to observe the terms of peace between Israel and Palestinian militants and (2) to restore law and order in the short to medium term so reconstruction can begin. While the U.S.- and Arab-led force is overseeing security, aid efforts, and reconstruction, the PA should undergo substantial and substantive reforms, recalibrating it to better meet the (vastly different but equally complex) challenges plaguing Gaza and the West Bank. This process would culminate in new PLC elections to produce a Palestinian government representative of and responsive to the population it serves. This process necessitates a significant investment of time, money, labor, and physical resources. It would also require the diplomatic support of the United States, the GCC, and Israel's Arab neighbors to manage tensions and mediate disputes. There will never be a postwar plan that pleases all parties entirely, but the best option is first *having* a plan.

Failure to plan for recovery and reconstruction efforts in postwar Gaza will allow either Hamas to reconstitute or another far more dangerous actor to fill the power vacuum left in its wake. A long-term plan that first addresses the humanitarian crisis in Gaza before focusing reform and reconstruction efforts on Palestinian institutions has the highest chance of succeeding. Much of Hamas's support in Gaza comes from its ability to provide social services more efficiently than the state; replacing those bodies with moderate, reliable PA institutions will occupy much of the space from which Hamas formerly drew its influence. Paired with more widespread governance reforms, a reconstruction plan targeted at first establishing security on the ground and providing for civilians' basic needs, and then reforming the PA and its social services, has the best likelihood of significantly reducing the influence Hamas's ideology has on postwar Gaza.



Appendix: Acronyms and Abbreviations

EF: Executive Force, or *Tanfithiya*
 GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council
 Hamas: *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Resistance Movement)
 IDF: Israel Defense Forces
 IMPACT-SE: Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education
 ISF: International Stabilization Force
 NGO: Nongovernmental Organization
 PA: Palestinian Authority
 PASF: Palestinian Authority Security Forces
 PCPSR: Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research
 PIJ: Palestinian Islamic Jihad
 PLC: Palestinian Legislative Council
 PNC: Palestinian National Council
 UN: United Nations
 UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
 UNSC: United Nations Security Council

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