

Netanyahu's Bold, Realistic Plan for 'the Day After Hamas'

By Daniel Pipes

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last month presented Israel's security cabinet with a short document: "The Day After Hamas." Its key passage states that Jerusalem plans to work primarily with Gazans to rebuild their territory. "Civil affairs and responsibility for public order will be based on local actors with 'management experience,'" it says, and "not identified with countries or organizations supporting terrorism" or receiving payments from them.

In a step toward this program of self-rule, the Israeli military has begun an informal pilot program of what it calls "humanitarian pockets" in parts of north Gaza cleared of Hamas. These local governing bodies consist of community leaders, whose duties will include distributing humanitarian aid and revising school curricula.

The concept of Israelis working with Gazans is brave, bold and contested. It faces two main criticisms. First, the U.S. and other governments want to hand Gaza to the

Palestinian Authority, which rules most of the West Bank and seeks Israel's destruction. Second, many Israelis and Palestinians alike insist that Jerusalem won't find those "local actors" to work with.

Yet Mr. Netanyahu's plan, and the optimism implicit in it, is correct. The proposal envisages a decent Gaza run by decent Gazans. That isn't inconceivable. It recognizes that Gazans have endured 17 years of unique hell: exploitation by their rulers as cannon fodder for public-relations purposes. Unlike other dictatorial regimes, which sacrifice soldiers for battlefield gains, Hamas sacrifices civilians for political support. The more misery Gazans endure, the more convincingly Hamas can accuse Israel of aggression and the wider and more vehement its global backing becomes.

A trove of evidence, however, suggests that Gazans reject being used as pawns in the terror group's strategy. Two surveys taken before Hamas's Oct. 7 massacre signal that Gazans want to live normal lives.

One, conducted by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in mid-2023, found that 61% wish that more Israeli jobs were offered to those living in Gaza and the West Bank. Sixty-two percent want Hamas to preserve the cease-fire with Israel, and 67% believe that "the Palestinians should focus on practical matters, . . . not on big political plans or resistance options." Seventy-two percent say "Hamas has been unable to improve the lives of Palestinians in Gaza," and 82% agree that "Palestinians should push harder to replace their own political leaders with more effective and less corrupt ones." Eighty-seven percent find that "many people are more preoccupied with their personal lives than with politics."

The second survey, taken by Arab Barometer days before the war began, found that "the vast majority of Gazans have been frustrated with the armed group's ineffective governance as they endure extreme economic hardship."

These findings have been borne out on the ground. Since Oct. 7, videos have shown crowds of Gazans chanting "Down with Hamas,"

cursing Hamas leaders, and proclaiming: "The people want to end the war. . . . We want to live!" Hamas's stealing of humanitarian aid has likewise reportedly provoked local anger and tension.

The same resistance has begun to break through in popular media. Live interviews of Gazans on Arab

Gazans appear ready to rebuke the terrorists and work with Israel to create a new governing body.

media networks often inadvertently broadcast sentiment critical of Hamas and its state backers. In a Nov. 5 interview with Al Jazeera, an elderly, wounded man said of Hamas members: "They can go to hell and hide there." The journalist cut him off.

These and other data points indicate that many Gazans want to be liberated from Hamas. However hostile to the Jewish state, they desperately want to move on from

their present squalor, even if that means working with Jerusalem.

Israel, therefore, can reasonably expect to find many cooperative Gazans ready to establish a new governing authority capable of taking on a range of tasks, from policing, utilities, municipal services and administration to communications, teaching and urban planning.

A decent Gaza will require tough Israeli military rule, overseeing a tough police state along the lines of what exists in Egypt and Jordan. In those countries, citizens can lead normal lives so long as they stay out of trouble and refrain from criticizing the ruler. Under such conditions, Gaza could become decent and economically viable. As others such as Singapore and Dubai have shown, democracy isn't necessary for such a project to succeed.

If the Israelis have the acumen and stamina to make this happen, they will have retrieved something positive out of tragedy.

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