

What is Netanyahu's plan for a post-conflict Gaza and does it rule out a workable ceasefire? Expert Q&A

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In recent days Joe Biden has been promising that a deal for a ceasefire is very close to agreement. But at the same time the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has revealed his vision for Gaza once the fighting stops, which appears to rule out Palestinian sovereignty on the strip. We spoke with John Strawson, a Middle East expert at the University of East London, who has been researching and publishing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for several decades.

No Palestinian state: Benjamin Netanyahu's vision for a post-conflict Gaza effectively rules out a workable two-state solution/ EPA-EFE/Abir Sultan

After weeks of wrangling, Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has published his vision for a post-conflict Gaza. How compatible is it with the idea of a two-state solution? To what extent is his tough line influenced by the more hawkish members of his government who take a hardline attitude to Palestinian sovereignty?

John Strawson: Netanyahu's [plan for a post-war Gaza](#) is simply not practical and does not rise to the political challenges of the times. It is based on two principles: Israeli security control over Gaza and a civil administration run by non-Hamas officials.

But there has been Israeli security control over Gaza in one form since 1967 and it has not brought security for either Israel or Palestinians. There is no reason to think that the Israel Defense Forces can do better now, especially after this catastrophic war. At the same time, it is difficult to see where the non-Hamas Palestinian officials will come from. Hamas has had a tight grip of Gaza since 2007 and anyone with any experience of administration is likely to be a member of Hamas, a sympathiser or someone used to working with Hamas.

While there is opposition to Hamas in the Gaza Strip, there is little organised political opposition that could replace them. Like the US and Britain in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, when they [banned officials from the Ba'athist party](#) from the administration, chaos will follow. The only realistic option is to extend the power of the Palestinian Authority - presently [based in Ramallah](#) - into Gaza. But Netanyahu and his [far-right allies](#) think it will advance pressure for a two-state solution - something they are opposed to.

To what extent is this a starting point for Netanyahu? Has he left himself the political space to manoeuvre given pressure from the US and other international allies?

The plan was provided mainly due to international pressure - especially by the Americans. It should be noted that the US secretary of state, Anthony Blinken, has been raising the issue of post-conflict

Gaza with the Israelis since November and it still took months to produce this flimsy document.

This gives us an insight into how difficult it is in practice for the US administration to use its apparent power over the Israeli government. Netanyahu has much experience of dealing with American politicians and plays the system very well. He knows that Biden needs a calmer Middle East as a background to his re-election bid in November. As a result, the bargaining relationship is quite complex.

Netanyahu clearly thinks he has time on his side. The nearer it gets to the US election the more difficult it gets for Biden to please the progressive Democrats who want a ceasefire and the more traditional Democrats who have Israel's back. What Netanyahu is doing is the minimum in the hope of hanging on hoping for a Trump win.

Does Netanyahu's vision reflect the feelings of the Jewish community in Israel? What about Arab voters? The prime minister appears deeply unpopular among most voter groups - is his intransigence more about maintaining his hold on power than on seeking a workable long term solution?

While Netanyahu is [deeply unpopular](#) with all sections of the Israeli public, we have to be careful in reading the public mood on policies for a post-war dispensation. [Polling suggests](#) that support for a two-state solution is declining. Israelis have been [so traumatised by October 7](#) that there is little support for Palestinian empowerment.

To some extent this is the result of the way that the Israelis view their country's disengagement from Gaza in 2005. It is [often presented](#) as an example of what happens when Israel ceases to occupy Palestinian land. In this account Israel leaves Gaza and Gaza becomes an armed encampment with the aim of destroying Israel - and indeed this [remains Hamas's policy](#), despite the group releasing an [amended charter in 2017](#).

But the 2005 disengagement which included dismantling all Israeli settlements in the strip was not the result of negotiations, but a unilateral act. The then prime minister, Ariel Sharon, did not want to hand over power to the elected Palestinian Authority, thinking it would boost the PA's for statehood. Instead, Israel just left - and that allowed Hamas, the major political force in Gaza, to claim that Israel has ["retreated under fire"](#). Hamas then capitalised on the situation and went on to [win the Palestinian legislative](#) elections in 2006.

The lesson of this is that Israel needs proper negotiations that can lead to a sustainable future - and that can only mean a Palestinian state alongside Israel. That is not merely right for the Palestinians but essential in any plan to defeat Hamas. It's not only a military operation but a political one and Palestinians need to be offered a peaceful and just alternative.

The US president, Joe Biden, has been talking up the idea of a ceasefire deal in recent days. But Netanyahu's plan seems to make the deal brokered in Qatar an impossibility. Is Netanyahu serious about bringing an end to the conflict? Or is talk about a possible deal more about Israel's need to be seen to be playing the game as well as optimism from a US president who needs to be able to show to his own voter base that he is getting results?

Former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert argues that Netanyahu is [dragging Israel into a long term war](#) to save himself. Olmert draws some drastic conclusions from his analysis suggesting that Netanyahu and his far-right allies want a permanent war that would also see Palestinians driven out of the West Bank. That might seem too apocalyptic - but it does convey a sense of the mismatch between US aims and the Israeli political dynamic.

Talks are going on simultaneously in Qatar, in Paris and in Cairo. It is evident that the [formula for a 40-day ceasefire](#) has been agreed but there is now [wrangling over the details](#). Much of this focuses on the grizzly trading over how many Palestinian prisoners will be exchanged for which Israeli hostages - both those still alive and those dead.

What is quite clear is that both Israel and Hamas have been dragging their feet as each thinks it is gaining the advantage by continuing the fighting. But with the arrival of the month of Ramadan (beginning March 10 - the date that Israel [plans to begin](#) its ground assault on the city of Rafah) there is some likelihood of a Ramadan truce.

Netanyahu is under [massive popular pressure](#) in Israel to move on the hostages even if that means painful concessions. Hamas is also under pressure by the masses of displaced Gazans who just want a semblance of a bearable existence for their families. So while Washington is exerting maximum pressure on Israel and its Arab allies, it is likely to be factors in Israel and Gaza that will lead to at least a temporary ceasefire. The challenge will then be to use the time to produce something permanent.

Is it even feasible for the Israeli government to continue with its policy of refusing to deal with Hamas?

In effect Israel has been dealing with Hamas indirectly all along. If the Israeli war aims were being successful it would not have to be negotiating with them over the hostage release issue. But I think that it's now no longer possible for Israel to talk to Hamas politically. In 2009 I thought [it was still possible](#) At the time it seemed possible that Hamas and Israel could agree a *Hudna*, an Islamic legal term for a long-term truce. But October 7 and subsequent Hamas statements and actions show that its real policy is the annihilation of Israel. So there is nothing to speak about. The real question is Israel speaking to the Palestinian Authority and having a viable plan for Gaza after the war rather than a renewed occupation.

The key to the next stage is to create a security mechanism that can replace the IDF and ensure the security of both Israel *and* the Palestinians. The international community - in particular the UN - has to stop being rhetorical and start being practical about peacemaking. What is needed is a security force that will give both Israelis and Palestinians confidence that the situation will change. Both sides must be able to feel secure - no more atrocities like October 7 and the Israeli response which has now killed 30,000 Palestinians, most of them civilians - and a high proportion of which have been women and children.

What is required is a multinational force that combines Arab League and Nato forces under perhaps Saudi command. Unless there is movement on this issue, there is little chance of a framework where any meaningful talks can take place.

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