

# Israel's return to war is a prelude to mass expulsion

Wednesday 19 March 2025, by [REIFF Ben](#) (Date first published: 18 March 2025).

**With Trump's green light for ethnic cleansing, Israel's renewed attack on Gaza threatens to become an all-out effort to empty the enclave of Palestinians.**

## Contents

- ['Finishing the job'](#)
- [Making Gaza unlivable](#)

*Palestinians mourn the death of those killed in an Israeli airstrike outside the Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip, March 18, 2025. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)*

Two months after agreeing to a ceasefire deal that should have ended the war, Israel has resumed its bombardment of the Gaza Strip with an intensity that recalls the [earliest days of the onslaught](#). Israeli airstrikes have killed over 400 Palestinians and wounded hundreds more since the early hours of this morning, and the army has [ordered](#) thousands of residents of the towns and neighborhoods spanning the perimeter of the Strip to flee their homes.

Israel has again fully [sealed off](#) Rafah Crossing to medical evacuees, while Egyptian and American forces that had replaced Israeli troops in the [Netzarim Corridor](#) as part of the ceasefire are withdrawing from their posts. Dismembered bodies are piling up in hospitals once more, with medical staff across the Strip warning that their facilities are at full [capacity](#).

We know what comes next: more airstrikes and evacuation orders and likely another ground invasion which, if we are to take Israeli ministers at their word, promises to be more extensive and lethal than the last. "Israel will, from now on, act against Hamas with increasing military strength," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office [said](#) in a statement earlier today. "With God's help," Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich [echoed](#), "[the renewed assault] will look completely different from what has been done so far." Former National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, who quit the government over the ceasefire deal, appears set to [triumphantly return to office](#).

But to what end? Israel is [spinning](#) a narrative that it had no choice but to resume the offensive due to "Hamas' repeated refusal to release our hostages, as well as its rejection of all the proposals it has received from U.S. Presidential Envoy Steve Witkoff and from the mediators." Yet this is a total distortion of reality, and the families of Israeli hostages who remain captive in Gaza know it.

"The claim that the war is being renewed for the release of the hostages is a complete deception," the Hostages and Missing Families Forum said in a statement. "The Israeli government has chosen to give up on the hostages [through] the deliberate dismantling of the process to return our loved ones."

Indeed, what Hamas rejected were Israel's attempts to renege on the terms of the ceasefire that

both parties had committed to. The [second phase](#) of the deal, which was supposed to bring about the return of the remaining hostages and a permanent ceasefire, was due to begin over two weeks ago, except Israel never allowed it to. Instead, together with Witkoff, Israel ripped up the agreement and concocted a [new proposal](#): to extend phase one and keep exchanging hostages for Palestinian detainees; in other words, to sever the release of hostages from any guarantee to end the war.

Israel knew Hamas would reject this proposal, and [that was the point all along](#). The maneuver simply gave the Israeli government a pretext to re-impose a [total blockade](#) on food, water, fuel, electricity, and medicine into the Strip; and now, with President Trump's [full backing](#), to resume its genocidal assault. This time, though, the end goal is clearer than ever.

*Palestinians at the scene of an Israeli airstrike in Khan Younis, March 18, 2025. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)*

## **'Finishing the job'**

When Trump stood beside Netanyahu in the White House on Feb. 4 and [proclaimed](#) his intention to "take over" and "own" the Gaza Strip, he didn't go into detail about what exactly this would portend for the enclave's 2.3 million Palestinian residents, besides making it clear that Gaza will no longer be their home. "We'll make sure something really spectacular is done," he declared, adding that the population could be relocated to "other countries of interest with humanitarian hearts" where they will be able to "live out their lives in peace and harmony."

In essence, what Trump presented wasn't really a blueprint; it was a green light for Israel's government and defense establishment to [begin imagining scenarios](#) for the ethnic cleansing of Gaza.

Where the population would go didn't really matter (Egypt and Jordan swiftly rejected Trump's suggestion that they would take in displaced Palestinians). What mattered was that the most powerful country in the world had given its backing to what the Israeli right has long referred to as "finishing the job" that the Nakba of 1948 left incomplete; what [senior ministers](#) and [government agencies](#) have been clamoring for since October 7; and what Netanyahu himself has [reportedly considered](#) to be a desirable outcome.

The Israeli government didn't waste any time in getting the wheels turning. As Environmental Protection Minister Idit Sliman [put it](#): "God has sent us the [Trump] administration, and it is clearly telling us: it's time to inherit the land."

As soon as Netanyahu returned from Washington, Israel's security cabinet resoundingly [endorsed](#) Trump's proposal. Defense Minister Israel Katz [set up](#) a new authority to facilitate what is euphemistically referred to as the "voluntary emigration" of Palestinians from Gaza, and discussed plans to that effect with senior figures in the army and the Prime Minister's Office. COGAT, the army unit responsible for handling Palestinian civilian affairs, [prepared](#) its own outline, stating that the expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza can proceed even if Egypt refuses to open its border: the army will instead facilitate their transport via land or sea to an airport, and from there to destination countries.

Lauding Katz's creation of a "very large emigration department" in the Defense Ministry, Smotrich [told](#) a meeting in the Knesset earlier this month that "if we remove 5,000 [Palestinians] a day, it will take a year [to expel them all]," adding that budget will not be an issue. And while he conceded that the logistics of finding countries to receive them will be complex, he noted that Israel was working with the United States to identify candidates.

*Israeli soldiers seen near the fence encircling the Gaza Strip, March 18, 2025. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)*

Indeed, in recent days, American and Israeli officials [told AP](#) that their governments had approached Sudan, Somalia, and Somaliland about absorbing Palestinians from Gaza in exchange for financial, diplomatic, and security benefits. CBS later [reported](#) that the Trump administration has also reached out to the new interim government in Syria via a third-party interlocutor.

It is unclear if any of these regimes would actually entertain such a proposition. But [if we learned anything](#) from the Abraham Accords, it's that, for the right price, there will be takers.

## **Making Gaza unlivable**

There will, of course, be no “voluntary emigration” from Gaza; Palestinians have [unequivocally rejected](#) Trump's plan, hitting back that the only places they will willingly relocate to are the villages, towns, and cities inside Israel from which they were expelled in 1948. Netanyahu, Smotrich, and Katz know this even better than Trump does — which is why, in practice, the idea of eradicating Gaza's population was always premised on a resumption of Israel's military assault on the territory.

Forcibly displacing over 2 million people, even with the support of a global superpower, is no simple task. For one thing, it would require eliminating Hamas as a viable resistance force, which Israel was unable to do throughout more than 15 months of fighting. Trump was [never going to agree](#) to putting American boots on the ground to fulfil his fantasy; it was always going to be left in Israeli hands to work out the practicalities. And while we don't yet know how exactly the army will escalate its renewed offensive — if indeed, as [reports](#) suggest, it intends to — we do have clues from the way it waged the war until now.

In particular, the army's [three-month operation in northern Gaza](#) that preceded the ceasefire provided something of a test case for mass expulsion, based on the so-called [Generals' Plan](#). By isolating three cities from the rest of the Strip, subjecting them to intense bombardment, and denying the entry of any humanitarian aid, Israel managed to forcibly displace [hundreds of thousands](#) of people. It is not hard to imagine that a renewed ground invasion could herald a similar move scaled up to encompass the whole enclave. How successful such an endeavor would be remains to be seen.

But Israel's 15-month onslaught also exhibited another impetus which, albeit not an official war aim, appears to have guided much of the military's policy in Gaza: an effort to bring about conditions that make it [impossible to sustain life](#).

*Palestinians at the scene of an Israeli airstrike in Khan Younis, March 18, 2025. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)*

There is simply no other way to explain the [starving](#) of an entire population while attacking [food distribution centers](#) and [aid convoys](#); the [shutting off](#) of water pipes and denial of electricity to desalination plants; the [systematic destruction](#) of health care facilities, [abduction](#) of [medical staff](#), and [restrictions](#) on foreign health workers; the razing of entire [towns](#) and [neighborhoods](#); and the attempt to [terminate](#) the only organization capable of preventing total humanitarian collapse. Even after the ceasefire took hold, Israel has continued to [prevent the entry](#) of mobile homes into Gaza in violation of the agreement, ensuring that stable life cannot return to the Strip.

In this sense, Israel had already laid the foundations for the eradication of Gaza's population before Trump even came to office. As Meron Rapoport [wrote](#) here last month, the president's speech at the

White House merely gave Israel's visions of ethnic cleansing a "Made in America" stamp of approval.

It is still possible that this new escalation will die down as quickly as it began; that Israel's massacre today was merely an act of grandstanding designed to pressure Hamas to release the remaining hostages without a commitment to end the war, or a last-ditch ploy to bring Ben Gvir back into the coalition in time to [pass the budget](#). But even if Israel returns to the negotiating table — tomorrow, a week from now, or in two months — there is nothing preventing the next massacre or the one after that, until, with or without the hostages, Israel decides the time is right to bring Trump's plan into fruition.

That this is now the direction of travel is undeniable. So long as the present conditions and balance of power prevail, a push to forcibly displace Gaza's population en masse appears inevitable, if not imminent.

**Ben Reiff**

---

**P.S.**

• +972 Magazine. March 18, 2025:

<https://www.972mag.com/israel-trump-gaza-war-mass-expulsion/>

• Ben Reiff is an editor at +972 Magazine and Vashti Media. Twitter: @bentreyf.

• Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

[BECOME A +972 MEMBER TODAY](#)