

## Between an Exhausted Army and the Far Right's Ambitions: What's Next for Gaza?





Palestinians flee an area in Gaza City that was targeted by Israeli airstrikes. [AFP]

With the official end of “Operation Gideon’s Chariots,” a military campaign launched by the Israeli army against the Gaza Strip, which had been touted as “decisive” and “highly impactful,” debate has once again flared within Israel’s security cabinet over the war’s future and the next strategic steps.

This debate has been anything but smooth. It has rekindled memories of earlier tensions with dismissed Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and outgoing Chief of Staff Herzl Halevi, both of whom have come under fierce criticism from Religious Zionist ministers who blame them for the failure to achieve the war’s goals.

Despite changes in context, details, and personnel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues to play his familiar game of managing and exacerbating tensions between his far-right allies and the professional echelons—particularly the military. He exploits these disputes both domestically and internationally to cast himself as the “savior” and solution-bearer, while in reality, he remains the epicenter of the crisis.

This political crisis is unfolding at a critical moment. It coincides with what had been a promising negotiation track, which was abruptly derailed after U.S. envoy Steve Wietkopf withdrew the American delegation—an act widely seen as aligning with Netanyahu’s desire to avoid any serious commitments that might

constrain his political and strategic calculations. As a result, the situation has entered a deadlock, requiring a clear decision on the next phase of war in Gaza.

### Annexation and Settlement Dreams Resurface

With hopes for a negotiated deal fading, leaders of the far-right Israeli establishment have escalated their demands regarding Gaza's future, reviving long-held ambitions to reverse the so-called "historic mistake" of the 2005 disengagement plan, which dismantled Israeli settlements in the Strip and saw the army's withdrawal.

In this context, far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir renewed calls for reoccupying Gaza and expelling its Palestinian residents. In a post on X, he declared: "We must return home—to [the settlements of] Gush Katif, to every part of Gaza," adding, "The ones who should leave are the enemies," referring to the Palestinian population.

Ben Gvir, who once lived in Gush Katif with his wife before the 2005 evacuation, reminded followers that the settlement block had stretched from Rafah to the outskirts of Deir al-Balah on confiscated Palestinian land.

During a provocative visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound on the occasion of the Jewish commemoration of the "Temple's Destruction," Ben Gvir reiterated his hardline positions. In a video filmed onsite, he advocated for "the complete occupation of Gaza and the declaration of Israeli sovereignty over it," asserting that "eliminating every Hamas member and encouraging voluntary migration are the path to retrieving the hostages and winning the war."

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich was quick to follow suit, claiming the U.S. had given a "green light" for transforming Gaza into a tourist zone after occupation and expulsion of its residents. "We have the opportunity to relocate Gaza's population to other countries, and we're working on it," he stated. "We will occupy Gaza and make it an integral part of Israel."

Smotrich also opposed any partial hostage deal, urging Netanyahu to "slam the door shut on this option" and immediately order a ground invasion. He emphasized the need for what he termed a "humanitarian separation plan," aimed at subduing Hamas and releasing hostages without preconditions—or else razing Gaza entirely.

These extreme stances have spilled into the security cabinet's deliberations. A heated clash erupted between Smotrich and new Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi's successor, Eyal Zamir. According to Yedioth Ahronoth, Zamir warned that occupying Gaza in full would take years. Smotrich, however, insisted on his aggressive plan, snapping, "We miss Halevi," in a thinly veiled jab—underscoring

deepening tensions between military leadership and far-right ministers.

Amid these escalations, Haaretz reported that Netanyahu floated a proposal to occupy parts of Gaza to appease Smotrich and dissuade him from resigning in protest over what he termed Israel's "permissiveness" in allowing humanitarian aid into the Strip.

### No "Strategic Clarity"... and Conflicting Goals

In a recent security cabinet session, Chief of Staff Zamir laid out the military's position bluntly: the army had reached the limits of its operational capacity, and a ceasefire coupled with a prisoner swap was now the most realistic and necessary path forward.

Netanyahu and his inner circle rejected this outright, accusing Zamir in closed-door meetings of "defeatism" and undermining the war's "potential for victory." According to Israel's public broadcaster, Zamir made it clear that the war's goals had become contradictory. He argued that it was impossible to simultaneously retrieve hostages and destroy Hamas completely. He called for a definitive political decision, rather than leaving the military to operate amid strategic ambiguity.

Political analyst Nahum Barnea, writing in Yedioth Ahronoth's weekend supplement, warned that the Israeli army now faces a defining crossroads—not just in Gaza, but in the strained relationship between military and political leadership. The rift between Zamir and the political echelon, he argued, is a deep crisis rather than a mere disagreement over strategy.

Israeli Army Radio reported "escalating tensions" between Zamir and Netanyahu's government, noting that the Chief of Staff has repeatedly demanded strategic clarity regarding the next phase. Zamir reportedly warned that the security cabinet hasn't convened in weeks and that the military "is not receiving clear directives about the future."

Privately, Zamir has cautioned that prolonged deployment in Gaza endangers soldiers and serves Hamas's interests. Analysts say the army has already begun to reduce troop numbers and reposition forces—preparing for a possible transitional phase even before a ceasefire or deal is reached.

According to military estimates cited by Army Radio, full occupation of Gaza is technically feasible but would take months, and rooting out Hamas above and below ground could take years.

Maariv reported that the military "doesn't know what the political leadership wants regarding the war's future." Netanyahu, the paper said, ignored Zamir's request to present updated military plans, further eroding trust within decision-

making circles.

## Hostages and the Illusion of a “Decisive Victory”

Government assessments remain conflicted, especially as the army resists further escalation while international pressure mounts over harrowing images of famine in Gaza—pressure that threatens both Israel’s global image and the core of its military strategy.

Netanyahu continues to allow friction between far-right ministers and military brass to fester, using it as a double-edged tool: domestic pressure and strategic signaling to the U.S., mediators, and even to Hamas. But this tactic, while politically expedient, offers no clear path forward.

He now faces two stark choices: accept a hostage deal backed by the military or pursue full-scale occupation, the preferred route of the far-right.

Israeli media reported that the security cabinet is set to hold a decisive meeting to address these dilemmas. According to Yedioth Ahronoth, three main options are on the table:

Occupy targeted areas such as central camps and Gaza City—where some hostages may still be alive—while evacuating civilians to the south.

Encircle Gaza City and nearby camps, conducting intense aerial bombardments to wear down resistance without a full ground invasion.

Maintain the status quo and pursue the faltering negotiation track.

The third option appears increasingly unrealistic, as key Israeli decision-makers believe Hamas has no interest in a deal under Israeli terms. Some hostage families are now urging the government to abandon the pursuit of total victory and focus instead on retrieving their loved ones—even if that means ending the war without achieving maximalist goals.

Following the conclusion of Steve Wietkopf’s visit, Israeli officials have started hinting at a shift toward renewed military action. Hebrew media quoted a political source—believed to be from Netanyahu’s office—saying: “We’re in discussions with the Americans, and there’s growing understanding that Hamas is not interested in a deal. The Prime Minister is therefore pushing for military action to free the hostages.”

Channel 11 described this as a direct signal that a large-scale military campaign may be next—potentially culminating in full occupation of Gaza under the banner of “freeing hostages by force.”

## “Total Victory” or “Comprehensive Solution”?

As internal Israeli debate intensifies, signs of a shift in U.S. policy are

emerging—especially following pivotal remarks by envoy Steve Wietkopf, which dealt a fatal blow to recent negotiations and now appear to pressure Netanyahu to choose a definitive course of action.

Wietkopf has begun discussing “alternative options” for releasing hostages—clear evidence of declining faith in negotiations. Former President Donald Trump also weighed in, offering Netanyahu unambiguous support for ending the matter militarily: “I think Hamas wants death—that’s terrible... It’s time to finish the job.” He added, “Israel will have to fight. They’ll have to clear the area... get rid of them.”

Later, Wietkopf floated the idea of a “comprehensive solution”—one that would dismantle Hamas rule, disarm the group, and release hostages in exchange for ending the war. While the proposal carries American backing, it risks further complicating negotiations, as it aims to secure through diplomacy what Israel’s military could not accomplish by force.

Netanyahu appears unenthusiastic about this U.S. proposal. He seems to favor a more limited hostage deal that avoids major concessions and allows for continued military operations—serving his broader strategic goal of population transfer and long-term dominance.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian resistance, led by Hamas’s armed wing, the Qassam Brigades, has signaled—via spokesman Abu Ubaida—that the current window of opportunity may not remain open much longer. The chance to release ten hostages as part of a wide-ranging deal may soon be off the table.

Ultimately, Gaza appears headed into yet another chapter of suffering, as political stagnation persists and Israel reverts to increasingly aggressive strategies. The bleakest of these entails the continuation of blockade, starvation, and destruction—following nearly two years of relentless war.