

20 novembre (The Economist)

[What happens to Gaza after the war? \(economist.com\)](https://www.economist.com)

Talks in trouble

What happens to Gaza after the war?

No one wants responsibility for running and rebuilding the ruined enclave



image: afp

Nov 19th 2023 | MANAMA

The smiles were forced, the bonhomie fake. In recent years the Manama Dialogue, an annual security pow-wow in Bahrain, has been focused on the threat from Iran and its regional proxies. Arab and Western officials found much to agree on. “It was just necessary to blame Iran to [be] applauded,” said Josep Borrell, the European Union’s foreign-policy chief, on a panel at the start of this year’s dialogue. “Today it is going to be a little bit more difficult.”

Indeed it was. The room listened politely while Brett McGurk, President Joe Biden’s Middle East adviser, offered his country’s view of [Israel’s war in Gaza](#), now in its seventh week. But the coffee-break chatter that followed was scathing. More than once Mr McGurk said that Gaza would receive a “massive surge of humanitarian relief” only once Hamas, a Palestinian militant group, released the roughly 240 Israeli and foreign hostages it abducted on October 7th.

The [humanitarian crisis](#) afflicting Gaza’s 2.2m people is stark. Food, clean water and medicine are scarce and patients are dying in hospitals that have run out of fuel. The southern half of the enclave is bursting at the seams, swollen to twice its pre-war population after an influx of displaced Palestinians, while the north is probably uninhabitable for years.

But America’s envoy to the region seemed unmoved. “The onus here is on Hamas. This is the path,” he said. The idea that help for Gazan civilians was contingent on a hostage deal did not go over well with a heavily Arab audience. “They’ve taken the whole population hostage,” said one attendee (the White House later said Mr McGurk’s remarks were “grossly misinterpreted”).

That was not the only point of contention. After two days of talking to officials about the plan for post-war Gaza, the inescapable conclusion is that there is no plan. The shattered enclave will need external help to provide security, reconstruction and basic services. But no one—not Israel, not America, not Arab states or Palestinian leaders—wants to take responsibility for it.

America hopes that Arab states will contribute troops to a post-war peacekeeping force, a proposal that is also backed by some Israeli officials. But the idea has not found much support among Arabs themselves. Ayman Safadi, Jordan’s foreign minister, seemed to rule it out altogether at the conference. “Let me be very clear,” he said. “There will be no Arab troops going to Gaza. None. We’re not going to be seen as the enemy.”

The reluctance is understandable. Arab officials do not want to clean up Israel's mess and help it police their fellow Arabs. But they also do not wish to see Israel reoccupy the enclave, and they admit, at least in private conversations, that the Palestinian Authority (pa) is too weak at present to resume full control of Gaza. If none of those options is realistic or desirable, it is not clear what is.

In the longer term, Mr McGurk said that a "revitalised Palestinian Authority" should [resume control](#) (it governed Gaza until Hamas seized power in 2007). For that to happen, though, would require two unlikely developments. First would be a serious Israeli effort to reach a two-state solution: Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, says he will not return to Gaza without one. But Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, has spent his career trying to sabotage that two-state solution (and he is not keen on the pa coming back to Gaza either).

Second is a serious effort to achieve the "[revitalised](#)" pa Mr McGurk spoke of. Mr Abbas, who is 88 years old, was elected in 2005 to a four-year term. Still in power, he has held office for longer than most Gazans have been alive. He is a sclerotic and uninterested leader; both he and his aides, some of whom are also his possible successors, are widely seen as corrupt. Nobody can explain how his government might be rejuvenated.

Even before the war, wealthy Gulf states were growing tired of chequebook diplomacy. They will probably be reluctant to fund reconstruction in Gaza, which will cost billions of dollars. "They've already rebuilt Gaza several times before," says one Western diplomat in the region. "Unless it's part of a serious peace process, they won't pay."

Then there is Hamas itself. Its leaders, and many of its fighters, seem to have fled to southern Gaza, a region where Israel has yet to send ground troops. For now, they appear to have enough food and fuel to remain in the web of tunnels beneath Gaza. Civilians are suffering under the Israeli siege. Their rulers are not. "They're not under any pressure at all," says an adviser to Israel's national-security council. "On the contrary, it helps Hamas, because they use it to build international pressure for a ceasefire."

Moussa Abu Marzouk, a Hamas official, said in a television interview last month that Hamas was not responsible for protecting civilians in Gaza. The tunnels under the strip, he said, exist only to protect Hamas; the un and Israel should protect civilians. Other Hamas leaders have berated the un for failing to send enough food and medicine. They brought misery upon Gaza by carrying out their massacre in Israel last month but want someone else to deal with the fallout.

For nearly two decades, Gaza has been a problem without a solution. Israel and Egypt were content to leave it under a blockade after the Hamas takeover. Despite his occasional paeans to Palestinian unity, Mr Abbas had no desire to go back to Gaza, and Hamas was happy to keep its grip over an immiserated enclave. Everyone sought to preserve the status quo.

That status quo was shattered on the morning of October 7th. The problem has become much bigger, and the solutions are far-fetched. Optimists hope the Gaza war will offer the chance to finally settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More likely, though, it will end with Gaza as yet another of the Middle East's failed states, broken but never rebuilt.