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## **Israel's forever conflict : The war in Gaza must end**

America should press Binyamin Netanyahu to accept a ceasefire, then press Hamas to disarm



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### Full text:

THIS time, Israeli officials insist, things will be different. On May 5th the cabinet approved a new plan for Gaza. It aims to mobilise tens of thousands of reservists. The army will reoccupy a part of the enclave, razing some buildings as it goes. Palestinians will be displaced to a sliver of land in southern Gaza. In parallel, Israel will let some aid into the strip, which it has blockaded since March 2nd. It will be stockpiled at hubs guarded by American mercenaries. Families will come once a fortnight to collect food and some essentials.

Supporters of this plan claim it will be decisive: destroying what remains of Hamas by denying it space to regroup or oppress Gazans and depriving it of food to feed its fighters. Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has spent 18 months promising "[total victory](#)". The plan's backers argue they need just a few more months to achieve it.

There is no reason to believe that they are right. For a start, the operation is unlikely to free the hostages who remain imprisoned in Gaza. Israel's army has morale problems: in some units only 50% of reservists report for duty. Polls show that more than 60% of Israelis oppose an offensive to reoccupy Gaza. Israel has already smashed Hamas's leadership, its rocket arsenal and its ability to mount complex attacks. What remains is a ragtag guerrilla force, which Israel will struggle to destroy because fresh recruits are plentiful. Given that rump Hamas cannot muster much firepower, it may not be worth destroying.

The new plan will bring further agony for Gazans. More than 2,000 have died since Israel resumed fighting in March, bringing the cumulative toll to a grim 52,000. Civilians are going hungry because of the blockade. Israel's scheme for supplying aid will offer scant relief. It makes no provision for people who are sick or unable to trek to a distribution centre.

The only people who benefit from continuing the war are Mr Netanyahu, who keeps his coalition intact, and his far-right allies, who dream of emptying Gaza and rebuilding Jewish settlements there. If they were to get their way, 2m people would be crammed into 25% of Gaza's territory with subsistence rations. Some ministers already gloat that such conditions would drive Gazans into exile. That would count as ethnic cleansing.

Food should not be used as a weapon. Israel must allow aid into Gaza and let charities distribute it. Some will be stolen by Hamas, which cares little for the plight of Gazans. That is bad, but the alternative would be starvation. Beyond that, it is past time for a lasting ceasefire. Donald Trump should demand that Mr Netanyahu agrees to one, in exchange for the release of all hostages. No other leader can compel him. The president is eager for a foreign-policy win. When he visits the Gulf next week, Arab leaders should urge him to pursue this one.

Then America should apply pressure to Hamas, using the strongest remaining tool at its disposal: reconstruction. The UN estimates this will cost \$53bn over the next decade. Mr Trump should issue an ultimatum: donors will not pledge a dollar until Hamas agrees to cede power and disarm. America's allies will need little convincing. Most want Hamas gone.

The odds are that Hamas will try to cling to power. But it will have to answer to its own people. Thousands of Gazans have already joined protests demanding its ousting. Perhaps their ranks will swell. And if Hamas ever posed a serious threat to Israel, then Israel would be entitled to strike again.

That outcome would be bleak, but the present course is bleaker. More Gazans will die from shelling and starvation. Hostages will perish in captivity. An endless war will deepen the rifts in Israel and further damage its standing in the world. Israel has achieved a string of victories over its foes. If it ends up depopulating and reoccupying Gaza it will commit a strategic blunder and a moral outrage. ■