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Everyone Will Be Disappointed with the Day After in Gaza

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September 5, 2025

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Executive Summary

The effort by France, Canada, Australia and others to support Palestinian statehood at the UN General Assembly this September is a desperate attempt to pressure Israel into ending the war while recognizing Palestinian Authority (PA) control of Gaza. Any multi-national coalition that operates inside Gaza will almost certainly insist on including the PA as political cover, especially if it includes Arab participants. Accordingly, the PA is doing everything it can to demonstrate to the world that it is ready to take on the responsibilities of full governance. In the end, Israel will most likely have to accept some sort of compromise if it hopes to avoid an indefinite occupation that stretches its military to the limit.

The result will probably be nominal PA control of Gaza but without a physical presence there, a multi-national force limited to protecting humanitarian and medical aid delivery, no foreseeable path to negotiations over statehood, and angry Western protesters who feel their governments have not gone far enough. This is what “The Day After” in Gaza will probably look like, not as many governments and think tanks have imagined it, but in actuality. Everyone will be disappointed with this outcome, including Israel, especially if it is left shouldering the burden in Gaza while the PA blames the occupation for its own inability to govern. And it comes with a number of challenges that all sides need to consider before they find themselves locked into a situation that gives them little maneuverability. Ultimately, the need for genuine Palestinian political reform is the one thing that all sides can agree upon, and this should be the starting point for any discussions moving forward.

Sound and Fury in New York

On September 9, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) will begin three weeks of wrangling over climate change, sustainable development, and human rights. France, Canada, the UK, and Australia have announced their intent to recognize Palestinian statehood in New York, though that may not be saying much in practical terms. Since the Palestinian Liberation Organization unilaterally declared Palestine to be a state in 1988, [147 member states](#) of the UN have recognized it. Moreover, even if the Palestinians don't have voting rights as a member of the General Assembly, they can introduce proposals and participate in many committees.

President Macron will take the opportunity to press for more countries to support the [New York Declaration](#) that was issued at the UN in late July, calling for a path to Palestinian statehood according to a "timebound process" that resolves "all outstanding and final status issues." The signatories to the Declaration believe that 15 months is a reasonable time scale. Protesters will probably line up on either side of Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, making for some great stock images. In an attempt to contain the issue, the U.S. Government has [revoked](#) the visas of President Mahmoud Abbas and other senior Palestinian officials, and Marco Rubio has [firmly stated](#) that "there can be no Palestinian state unless Israel agrees to it." At UNGA, Rubio will again make the administration's case why this is neither the right time nor the right process, President Macron will grand-stand about the



Protestors and Counter-Protestors in New York City on October 9, 2023

need for peace now, and the media will revel in political theater that has no obvious consequences. Not obvious ones, at least.

Abuzz with Activity in Ramallah

For any of this to look credible, the Palestinians will have to get their act together. Since the start of the war in Gaza, the United States and its Arab partners have bandied about ideas for “[The Day After](#)” in which a revitalized PA replaces its aging leadership, reforms its institutions, and demonstrates its commitment to ensuring peace and security. And yet, despite almost two years to prepare, the PA is rushing to put forward last-minute half-measures that look acceptable on paper, leave Mahmoud Abbas in place, and [kick the can down the road](#) on more substantive reforms. If anything, Abbas appears to be [lining up](#) long-time Fatah stalwarts and insiders to inherit his throne, rather than allowing a genuine electoral process that would welcome independent voices and the younger generation.

In the last week alone, Palestinian Prime Minister Muhammad Mustapha went to Egypt to plan a donor’s conference for a proposed multi-phase \$53 billion [reconstruction fund](#). The PA announced a long-awaited [Community Support Committee](#) that will theoretically administer Gaza under its own authority, and Abbas appointed a team to draft a [new constitution](#) that will define the identity and borders of a Palestinian state.

It’s a flurry of activity. The PA has been eager to burnish its security credentials and assert its authority as well. Over the last six months, PA forces have cracked down on West Bank [protests](#) against the war in Gaza, prevented [dozens of delegates](#) from attend-



President Mahmoud Abbas Meets with UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy, January 2025

ing a conference on Palestinian institutional reform, and announced plans to train 5,000 new [police officers](#) for deployment in Gaza. The PA is all dressed up with nowhere to go, for now.

Unsustainable Situation in Gaza

And that may be as far as it gets. As long as Abbas is alive and an older generation of Fatah loyalists is in charge, the PA is unlikely to ever achieve the kind of top-down reform it needs to meet the expectations of those states that are notionally backing its bid for statehood. As long as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is in office and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) continue operations in Gaza, it is hard to imagine them allowing PA administrators or police units to operate there. It is wildly ambitious of the French to hope for a time-bound process leading to statehood, let alone within 15 months, even if Israel were to hold elections and form a new government.

However, a [majority](#) of [Israelis](#), many mainstream [politicians](#), and [Netanyahu](#) himself all want to avoid an indefinite occupation of Gaza, even if there is a broad, tacit agreement on the need for Israel to maintain buffer zones and security corridors. Netanyahu vehemently opposes PA rule in Gaza, and Israel has tried several times over to find [local clans](#) that can serve as partners in governance. But these actors all face violent retribution from Hamas, most of them pose problems in terms of their own illicit activities, and they are all wary of doing anything that will publicly expose them as collaborators with Israel.

Netanyahu has no viable options for accomplishing his stated goals, absent a categorical defeat of Hamas that obliterates Palestinian public support for the movement and, hence, its ability to recruit and re-

surge. That is the true meaning of “total victory” and it is impossible. Therefore, as much as the actions of the PA, the Arab states, France and its allies at UNGA all appear to be little more than political theater, they could have the second-order effect of shaping the outlines of what may become the only solution for Israel in Gaza.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, 2024

Image: Brian Jason / Shutterstock.com

Compromise Scenario

Though Netanyahu will probably have to accept a compromise, he will likely seek to make as few concessions as possible. Under that scenario, the PA would be allowed to claim responsibility for Gaza without actually having any permanent presence there. All to provide a sliver of legitimacy for other international forces to deploy and engage in very limited operations – probably nothing more than protecting humanitarian relief convoys and medical stations. Whatever remains of Hamas will carry on harassing the local population and conducting occasional raids, as it attempts to reorganize and as Israeli forces carry out operations. It will be a tenuous situation in which international partners present conditions that include an eventual full Israeli withdrawal and handover of power to the PA, and Israel holds tight in the hope that the security situation improves enough for its Western and regional critics to simply adjust to the new normal.

Countless experts have outlined other scenarios for “The Day After” in Gaza, though most tend to revolve around the same basic concepts, as [Ambassador \(ret.\) James Jeffrey](#) has noted. Their proposals are all wrapped up in the politics of the actors involved, particularly in terms of the assumptions they make about who will have the political will to act and under what authority.

- The [Vandenberg Coalition and JINSA](#) released an insightful and prescient report in February 2024 that does a very credible job of laying out the realities, especially in terms of the chal-

lenges of bottom-up deradicalization in Gaza and top-down political reform in the PA. Their recommendations are essentially what the current Israeli Government envisions, as outlined above, in which the United States helps mobilize key partners for securing Gaza’s humanitarian needs. Not UN peacekeepers, U.S. forces, the PA or other Arab militaries, but rather countries from outside the region that are friendly with Israel. And America’s allies will work to bolster the capacity of independent actors in Gaza and diaspora Palestinians to assume more responsibility in support of coalition efforts.

- The [Wilson Center’s](#) report from early 2024 calls for a Multi-National Authority led by the Arabs, with the possible addition of UN peacekeepers, overseen and funded by a contact group that includes the G7 member states. It is this entity that will be in charge of policing and governance, as well as finance, education, judicial reform, and even public opinion polling, until such time that it can transition to Palestinian rule. Their recommendations are essentially what the Europeans envisioned in the early months after the October 7 attacks and what some European governments probably still cling to, in the false hope that a version of this can succeed.
- [RAND’s](#) Day After Report from January 2025 is the most comprehensive study and projects forward a vision that lies somewhere in between that of the Israeli Government on the one side and the Europeans and their partners on the other. Importantly, RAND acknowledges that peace is

unsustainable without reconstruction and economic growth, which means linking Gaza through investment, training, and trade to Israel and to the rest of the world. In order to achieve that goal, a multi-national coalition authority of Western and Arab partners will have initial responsibility for assembling a predominantly Arab force of international and local actors with the goal of transitioning control to the PA Security Forces. These recommendations take the process of PA capacity-building that has been underway in the West Bank since the 1990s and extend it to Gaza. RAND is at least open and honest in admitting, however, that the PA suffers a severe legitimacy crisis and the current Israeli Government will almost certainly reject the proposal.

And there are more problems inherent in each of these papers that go beyond those identified by their authors. Even if, by some miracle, local independent actors in Gaza are able to pass Israel's vetting standards, avoid reprisals, withstand public accusations of collaboration, and deliver services, they will then [demand the authority](#) to act in an official capacity of their own, which neither Israel nor Fatah are likely to grant. The dream that some people have, of an international force vetting and transitioning power to independent local actors along the lines of the occupying authorities in Germany and Japan [after WWII](#), is pure fantasy.

Making Gaza GREAT

The debate over what to do about Gaza is becoming more polarized the longer the conflict endures and the more the parties appear to be intransigent in their demands. If think tanks and commentators have trouble finding the middle ground in their proposals, it is in part because the actors themselves keep moving farther to the extremes. Just as President Macron is rallying support for the PA at the UN General Assembly this fall, so too is Prime Minister Netanyahu doubling down on total military victory over Hamas in Gaza. For many months now, President Trump has been considering an [alternative scenario](#) that breaks away from this vicious cycle, involving the temporary removal of the Gazan population and complete transformation of the Strip. It is a low probability scenario, but with a high impact should it succeed.

The latest iteration of this concept, the Gaza Reconstitution, Economic Acceleration and Transformation (GREAT) plan, is a proposal leaked to the media on August 31 that envisions transforming the landscape of Gaza through debris removal, unexploded ordinance clearance, real estate development, basic infrastructure improvement, global trade integration, vocational training, and the temporary relocation and housing of up to two million Gazans. It is public knowledge that the U.S. Government has been in talks with countries like [Ethiopia](#) and [South Sudan](#) to take in the refugees. And as with all [consultant-driven](#) PowerPoint slide decks, these performance targets are aspirational. They can and will be adjusted downward over time as circumstances dictate. And who is

to say? Perhaps 70 percent or even 50 percent of this incredibly ambitious program would be a tremendous accomplishment, benefitting the many thousands who inevitably stay in Gaza just as much as it benefits the many thousands who leave and then return.

Whether or not the Trump Administration adopts this particular plan, it is indicative of the type of solution that many in Washington and Jerusalem would welcome, as it avoids the thorny problems of standing up local security forces, empowering the PA, or engaging a multi-national coalition of friends of Israel. But, in order to get off the ground, it requires a number of contingent factors that must all succeed simultaneously up-front. Host countries have to approve the residency permits for the refugees, the donors have to allocate relocation and reconstruction funds, Israel has to sort and vet the funding recipients, and everybody will demand a legal framework with written assurances and a clear explanation of what happens when deadlines are not met. All at once. And then it requires the mobilization of resources and supply chains on a scale and according to a timetable that would be impossible. There will not be enough concrete, steel, wire, pipes, cranes, and workers to construct six to eight smart cities, along with five new major hospitals, a deep port, and a high-speed rail, not to mention a hyperscale data center, electric vehicle manufacturing facilities, 30-40 luxury hotels, and (starting in year three) a hundred grade schools and 40 vocational schools per year over a ten-year period.

How much of this has to be accomplished in order to declare it a success? If not 70 or 50 percent, how about 40 or 30? If the rubble is cleared away, ordi-

nance properly disposed, existing hospitals renovated, several dozen schools built, two or three major urban centers constructed, a few factories erected, and the infrastructure laid for water, electricity, and sewage, is that enough? If it were, then the West Bank would be a flourishing haven of peace and security, and clearly it is not, as evidenced by the rolling series of [military raids](#) that Israel has been conducting all year.

This type of radical economic development plan hinges on the hope of prosperity. It is Netanyahu's long-held belief that [economic growth](#) rather than political negotiation is the prerequisite for peace. That means the promise of such things as tourism and technology are not optional. Rather, they are elements that must be achieved in some degree, along with economic planning that considers the Palestinian and Israeli economies as closely interconnected systems, all in order to reduce the inequality, anger, and hopelessness that drive the conflict, as [Dahlia Scheindlin](#) has written. That may sound like a call for a more Socialist approach to Gaza reconstruction, but frankly any proposal for economic transformation is essentially a government hand-out, presumably funded by the Arab Gulf states.

Hope for the Best, Prepare for the Worst

There is little point in engaging in an unrealistic debate about imminent Palestinian statehood, standing up independent local actors, assembling a security coalition of international friends of Israel from outside the region, or fundraising hundreds of billions of investment dollars and using scorched earth as collateral. We have to acknowledge that [almost all international plans](#) admit (explicitly or implicitly) some element of a messy scenario in which Israel has to provide a nominal role for the PA and a limited presence of Arab forces on the ground. And only then can we think through ways to minimize the problems that will almost certainly result from it.

The first problem is that everyone supporting statehood right now has raised expectations too high, and both they and their voters will be disappointed by the eventual results. These Western governments have gambled on the war in Gaza coming to an end and the PA implementing meaningful reforms, with a transition away from Abbas and his generation, all in the short-term. Not a murky situation that lingers in a half-formed status indefinitely. And yet, come UNGA this fall, their call for recognition will mobilize waves of protesters to rally around a new set of slogans for action now.

The second problem will come when the PA insists on putting its own civil administrators and/or police forces into Gaza, and the multi-national forces insist on setting timelines and targets for the transition

to PA rule. The Israeli Government can stall and hedge, but there will probably come a moment when multi-national forces come under fire and their threat of withdrawal will force the issue.

The third problem is how to achieve an end-state for Gaza, even in the absence of full statehood involving territorial sovereignty for the Palestinians as a whole. The proposal for PA control of Gaza is predicated on the idea that it will be used as a springboard for statehood. But if Israeli forces remain in Gaza indefinitely, even if only in the form of buffer zones and security corridors, and the PA is stuck in an indefinite holding pattern of only notional control, then what? Does the PA deflect attention from its own governance challenges by blaming the occupation? Or does the PA go the opposite route and encourage Israeli policing of Gaza, with Fatah hoping to use Israeli forces as a means of enforcing the new political status quo? Probably a bit of both. And that means there is no real end-state for Gaza, as the Israeli presence becomes a crutch that the PA leans on, for better and worse.

The Critical Need for PA Reform

So much of this is dependent on the Palestinian Authority. If Mahmoud Abbas will gracefully resign and hand over power to a competent and charismatic leader from the next generation, it would have an enormous impact on every aspect of this situation. It would bolster confidence among the Arab states, especially in the Gulf Cooperation Council, and encourage them to lobby harder in Western capitals for support. It would give the Europeans a justification for kick-starting a new round of peace talks without pre-conditions or expectations for the outcome, taking a step back from the insistence on full statehood, and using the Palestinian transition of power as an excuse for a fresh look at the issues.

New PA leadership could negotiate the terms of its participation in a radical reconstruction plan involving the temporary removal of Gazans, in a way that makes the economic development effort more achievable. Genuine Palestinian political support for the reconstitution of Gaza might compensate for the inadequacies of the current proposal and allow planners to lower their targets and adjust their timeline. Right now, all efforts need to be put on pressuring the PA to follow through on the real reforms that they have promised, because if there is one thing that all sides agree upon, it is the need for new Palestinian leadership. That should be the starting point for any discussions on a way forward.



Gazans Demand the Departure of Abbas, 2019

Image: Anas-Mohammed / Shutterstock.com

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