

SCHANZER: Good morning and welcome. Thank you for tuning in to today's event hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm Jonathan Schanzer, senior vice president here at FDD. It's Wednesday, December 13th, and we're thrilled to be hosting a conversation on options and considerations for the future of Gaza after Israel's war to destroy Hamas.

We're pleased to have a first-rate lineup to discuss today's topic. First, we have my colleague, Eyal Hulata, FDD's inaugural senior international fellow. He previously served for two decades in Israeli national security roles, and most recently as national security advisor and head of Israel's National Security Council under Prime Ministers Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid.

We also have my good friend, Ghaith Al-Omari, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. He previously served as advisor to the negotiating team and held various other positions within the Palestinian Authority.

Today's conversation will be moderated by Nahal Toosi, a first-rate reporter who serves as foreign affairs senior correspondent for *Politico*. She recently authored an article for *Politico* on how the Biden administration is planning for a postwar Gaza. I encourage all of our viewers to check that out.

Before I hand the floor over, just a few words about FDD. For more than 20 years, FDD has operated as a fiercely independent, nonpartisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, we do not accept foreign government funding.

Since Hamas's attacks on Israel on October 7th, FDD experts have produced more than 1,500 broadcast, print, and radio appearances and original research publications. To stay up to date on our real-time analysis, I encourage you to regularly check our website, [FDD.org](https://www.fdd.org), and follow us on X, [@FDD](https://twitter.com/FDD).

With that, Nahal, the floor is yours.

TOOSI: Hi, everyone. I'm so glad you can join us, and I'd like to thank FDD in particular for hosting this conversation.

I'm going to start off this — this talk with — with an appeal to my two guests. Ever since this war began, I have been battling feelings of anger and disappointment, so I need you each to tell me something that gives me some hope for the future when it comes to this seemingly intractable conflict.

Eyal, do you want to start first?

HULATA: Well, you know, from an Israeli perspective, this situation is really one of the worst we've known since the creation of Israel. I understand the need for optimism, and I promise to get there, but I think that having this conversation without recognizing how devastating October 7 was and how traumatic it is for the Jewish people to have this worst day of civilian casualties from the first existence of conception of Israel as a country. Israel did not plan this. Israel did not intend to be in this situation. Israel did not intend to start a war with Gaza, right? On the contrary, if we were planning to have a war with Gaza, it would not look like this. October 7 wouldn't have happened and wouldn't have been surprising.

So, the fact that we found ourselves in such a situation, needing to respond overwhelmingly to prevent this from happening again creates circumstances that are, of course, devastating all across. And I share those feelings with Nahal, and I'm sure that Ghaith from his perspective will say the same.

You know, I think what I should say to this is that we're all family. We're all cousins. We're all born in the same region, and this is the place we call home, I think each of us with his own stories, even though that we're now, all three of us, are in the United States and in DC for this point in time.

And at least for me, this is very important. On — when this event happened, I was in the UAE. I was not in Israel and I was not in the United States. And the evening before, Friday, October 6th, I attended this wonderful dinner commemorating three years to the Abraham Accords, and you know, with prominent people, friends from the UAE, from the United States, and from Israel were all there, and we spoke about how wonderful the Middle East could be if we will continue this process, including the potential positive outcomes and this could happen to the Palestinian conflict coming from a good spirit of — of — come — from the Gulf and for those countries.

I think that all of those are still valid, I think that all of those are still the same. I think that most of the friends in the region understand that extremism is fundamentally dangerous to the national security interests of all of those countries.

And as long as we understand that and as long as the — we remember that our shared values — being realistic and pragmatic and preferring life over extremism — I think that as long as we have this in our heart, regardless of the countries we come from, there is a place for hope and there is a place for a better future.

We'll just need to work towards that and remember that the bad guys must lose in order for us to be there living together in peace.

TOOSI: Well, we're definitely going to talk a lot about that. Ghaith, any words of optimism to let me off of my couch of despair?

AL-OMARI: The short answer is no. No, look, I mean, I do share what Eyal said. I mean, what we're going through is one of the darkest moments. Certainly, October 7th was a devastating terror attack, and it can only be described as a terror attack. We're seeing today in Gaza a — respectable issues of, you know, technicalities. It's a human tragedy.

It's very hard to think optimistically when you see that, yet, I will say, from a policy point of view, I would say there are two things that actually strike me as potentially positive.

One is the understanding that the Palestinian and Israeli issues cannot be put aside. And I think there was a lot of thinking that, you know, we can ignore it, we can use the regional as our placement for the Palestinian-Israeli — I think this was certainly a tragic reminder that this is not possible.

And at the same time, I actually fully agree with Eyal on the point that despite all of what's happening, I think, when I talk to people in the region, to officials, the sense I get is that they want to get over this period, they want to deal with it the day after — we will talk about this, I'm sure, in greater detail — but they're still committed to a trajectory that builds on the Abraham Accords, builds on regional integration.

So I think in many ways, there's an understanding after this that — actually, even a deeper understanding that terror will not be — will not — should not be allowed to win, and if we don't go in that direction, it is — will be horrible.

I will conclude with, again, echoing what Eyal says — the — at the end of the day, Palestinians and Israelis are there to stay. This is their homelands. The — we need to look for a way right now. Yes, an end to this conflict is not a possibility in the short-term, but as we think about how to move forward, we have to keep that in mind there. How do we start putting the foundation for a process that will ultimately lead us to an end to this conflict?

TOOSI: Well, I've done some reporting on this issue, especially on what the United States is thinking in terms of a day after scenario for Gaza. And to put it in a nutshell, the Biden administration expects — is basically planning for an interim phase after the heavy fighting ends where they think that an international force will likely try to stabilize the territory, followed by, over time, it being taken over by a reformed Palestinian Authority. They like to use the word "revitalize" but it's going to have to be way more than revitalized.

But let's face it, none of this planning matters if the Israelis and the Palestinians are not on board. Eyal, you're a former Israeli official who has plenty of insight into what's going on in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and beyond. What is the Israeli plan for the day after? Please give me some scoops.

HULATA: Well, Nahal, you know, I mean, it will be difficult for me to address this question directly because I think that the current government in Israel is not necessarily engaged meaningfully in such a plan.

There are official visits in Israel this week and the American administration is demanding answers, and I was told and read in the news last week that the — Prime Minister Netanyahu has formed a group led by high officials to talk about this and potentially plan something ahead.

So, you know, I cannot speak on behalf of my government. I can speak on behalf of what I think should be and hopefully in the near future will be the right policies governed by Israel because clearly I think that unless there is also political transition in Israel, where extremists are not part of the decision-making process, it will be difficult to move ahead.

But even when I'm — having said all of that, the appetite among the Israeli public, I think across the board, including myself, to see the Palestinian Authority in a form similar to what we see today, taking Gaza and trying to change it, this will be a complete failure.

There will be no support for that in Israel, not because I don't think that we need to find a solution — and I clearly believe that only Gazans can rule Gaza — but the — unfortunately, the Palestinian Authority has proven to be inefficient also to rule in the West Bank, not only ruling Gaza.

And the fact that this is the case does not make me very optimistic about the potential of that happening, but I think that there is an understanding in Israel across the board that there must be a civilian governance in Gaza that is capable in holding that.

But what we also know is that in order to be in a discussion, that we talk about the day after, we need to have passed the day before. And in the day before, Hamas should be removed completely from all of its authorities and responsibilities in Gaza because Hamas, I think, for the last 18 years — and I don't think that I'm the only one who thinks that — you may agree with me — I mean, Israel withdrew from Gaza 2005, handed it to the Palestinians — right?

So as long as Hamas is there, there is no future for Gaza, but once this has changed, I think that we can meaningfully start working on civilian, pragmatic governance, self-governance in Gaza.

TOOSI: So look, I — we're going to talk about what it means for the war to end, right, so that there is a day after, but I — let's say you're advising this government or — and whoever is in charge — maybe you are the government. I — what is, like, one or two things you absolutely feel must happen for the day after scenario to take place? It can be something very technical, just...

HULATA: The two important principles that we need to ensure the day after — the first is that the security of the civilians in Israel must be restored. The security and the sense of security, this is crucial. I mean, you know, I'm — clearly, we're — been talking about the day after, talk about the Gazans and how we should restore the strip that has been demolished as we look at it.

There are about a quarter of a million Israelis displaced from their homes, both in the south and in the north, because of — this brutal invasion to their homes and their communities intended to slaughter them. So the first principle, and I can be detailed: we will need a different security apparatus and mechanism that would allow those people to come back to their homes.

And the second thing, in parallel to that, is that we will need a completely different set of resources and of intentions of rebuilding Gaza for the Gazans themselves in a way that would create a future that will look very differently than what we had before.

TOOSI: What does that mean exactly? And what...

HULATA: My hope is that if...

TOOSI: ... a security zone, do — security for the Israelis, are you talking about a buffer zone? Like, I'm just wondering if you can get a little more specific?

HULATA: Yeah, so, I mean, of course we're talking about a buffer zone, a demilitarized buffer zone. Even when Hamas is not in control of Gaza, there will be enough guns there that people could use them to shoot through the fence in any point in time.

Of course we will need a buffer zone, we will need a completely reconstructed Rafah Crossing to ensure the trucks that come from Gaza did not possess all of the equipment that Hamas were able to infiltrate into Gaza, and to build all of this — you know, to smuggle in weapons and arms and explosives and all the things they needed for the rockets.

And on the other side, we'll also need to make sure that the resources that come into the Strip go to the civilians of Gaza and not to Hamas. We will need to see that the concrete that is getting there and the cement that is getting there actually goes to rebuilding homes and houses rather than digging tunnels and, you know, putting all those concrete needed for them to sustain.

I mean, I've followed this. We've seen this, and I have to tell you as Israelis, we both wanted to ensure that Hamas does not use the resources for themselves because they are the enemy, but we also knew that as long as the Gazans live this way and oppressed by Hamas and the resources are deprived from them, this will erupt in a certain point in time. And unfortunately, it erupted in the worst possible way.

So these are the two principles. We will need to secure Israel and hopefully with the trust of the countries around us that we're doing this without intention to occupy Gaza and, of course, not to resettle Gaza. Gaza needs to remain the home of the Gazans. But also a meaningful restoration that is productive, that does not endanger the Israelis, and to start putting the resources for the Gazans themselves so that they will have a future.

TOOSI: So this is very helpful, and although, I think we can acknowledge that there will be questions about exactly where that buffer zone will be located, but that's a different discussion.

Ghaith, what is the Palestinian point of view on this? And I know that's kind of a weird question to ask because it's not like you represent all Palestinians or that Eyal represents all Israelis. I know that's difficult. But, you know, what — we've heard the Palestinian Authority leadership say they're not going to go into Gaza on the back of an Israeli tank. It's kind of a mess, but I mean, what's your sense of what Palestinians wish to see in terms of the day after?

AL-OMARI: I mean, maybe before I answer you, just maybe a couple of reactions to what Eyal said...

TOOSI: Sure.

AL-OMARI: ... in terms of the Israelis. But look, I mean, if I were advising the Israelis today, I will say first thing is do no harm. I see — I feel today that the political statements coming from the Israeli government, from the prime minister is foreclosing a lot of the possibilities, a lot of the avenues that we can have for the day after. What...

TOOSI: Which statement is that? Can you...

Future Gaza: Options and Considerations for the Day After the War

*Featuring Eyal Hulata and Ghaith Al-Omari
Moderated by Nahal Toosi
Introductory remarks by Jonathan Schanzer*

AL-OMARI: I mean, for example, when Bibi says — Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, when he says, “No Palestinian Authority”, this basically makes it very hard for other countries that want to frame their role in Gaza as a transitional role ultimately for the Palestinians to rule themselves.

When the prime minister says never a two-state solution, this makes it impossible for some of the protection partners to come in. We saw yesterday the Emiratis, for example, you know, push back on this one. So I would say for the Israelis if I were to give them advice, I would say today be careful and be restrained with your statements because ultimately you don’t want to close avenues.

I have said the Israelis have their own politics, but their potential partners, other countries also have their own politics and don’t do anything and don’t say anything today that would make it difficult for some of these Arab countries and some of the European countries to come in and play a role the day after.

Now in terms of the Palestinians, as you rightly said, it’s a mess. It’s a mess because today it’s very hard to define who speaks for the Palestinians. The Palestinian Authority continues to be the recognized international address, yet I just saw a poll actually this morning that says 92 percent of people in the West Bank want Abbas to resign today. So — and a majority sees the PA [Palestinian Authority] as a liability. And so, it’s very hard to see if this is the Palestinian Authority, if it can speak for the Palestinian public.

Hamas is very popular today, yet we see its popularity in Gaza actually dipping. So it’s very hard to say what they want. Today basically I would say that for most of the Palestinians, what they want today is for the fighting to end, and I think this is a very clear point.

When it comes it comes to the day after, the Palestinians are split. The Palestinian Authority itself doesn’t want, as you said I think, does not want to come on the back of Israeli tanks, but frankly even if it wanted to, today it is simply not capable of doing it. It does not have the capability, the actually physical capability.

What we see today, the PA is incapable of running, you know, Nablus in the West Bank or Jenin in the West Bank. You want it to run Gaza, which is much more complicated? But more importantly it lacks the political legitimacy to come in. Again, in the same poll, most Gazans would reject the Palestinian Authority coming in.

So, if we want to see capable Palestinian voice, we have to do some very, very serious reform in the Palestinian Authority. Not kind of, you know, cosmetics, not only technical reform, but key political reform. I mean, here I think we have to go and revisit what President George W. Bush was proposing and go with something along these terms. Sidelining some of the corrupt actors, empowering a strong prime minister, and revitalizing the political life in — within — among Palestinians, which has really been atrophied under Abbas.

TOOSI: Well, you know, these are good points, but one thing. I mean, reforming the Palestinian Authority or let’s say like completely building a new Palestinian Authority and if you want to call it the Palestinian Authority or a Gazan administration or whatever, let’s just say you build a new structure or completely reform this one. There’s a lot that’s going to have to happen. It’s worth its own book probably, but I want to know from both of you, and let’s start with Eyal, what is one thing that should not be done as part of the reconstruction or the construction of a new Palestinian leadership? Let’s start with you, Eyal, and then Ghaith. What should people not do, the mistake to avoid?

HULATA: Well first of all, I think that the first mistake that people might do, being careless and not in good enough understanding is just to think that we can — you know, that the Palestinians should change from the set of all old guard leaders that are there today with replacement with a similar mindset just because they are known or have good relationship and ties with the American administrations and others. This will be exactly the same.

I think the main problem of the PA is that it does not serve the Palestinians. It serves themselves. Unfortunately, it's also true in Hamas not because they are corrupt in that way because they only care about the resistance and not for the people.

So if the people, both in the West Bank and in Gaza, live under rulers and establishments that do not care for them, their interest is not aligned with the needs of the people to promote prosperity and better life, then that is a problem.

You know, when I was National Security Advisor and our government tried to promote steps that would improve the economic situation in the West Bank, for instance, also in Gaza. And the PA opposed it because they thought we were doing these to evade a political solution where, in fact, we're trying to make good use of the time to promote the lives of the people so there will be less hostility so maybe later in the future we can reach reasonable agreements. And this was rejected, and I have too many examples for that unfortunately. This is, I think, a very important piece.

The second thing that is important is that while this transition is done, you know, I don't expect the Palestinian Authority to be supportive of the Israeli narrative. This — I mean, they're, of course, stand to promote the narrative of the Palestinians and the needs and rights of the Palestinians.

That's fine. But if the Palestinian Authority does not engage in a meaningful way to reach a solution that is within the scope of understanding, even if it is a temporary solution later to be transitioned, if a new leadership will adopt resistance narratives and violence, this will never end. This will never end.

And hopefully, we can reach that. You know, I mean, I'm not sure. I cannot select who should be the leader of the Palestinians. Any name I will say will probably be problematic with them, so I'll keep my mouth shut, even though I have some ideas, but I think...

(CROSSTALK)

HULATA: ... the important — we can do this some other time Nahal— but I think this is important that, once this is done, an understanding both from the Arab countries, who understand the dangers of radical — radicalization and also by the foreign countries, especially the US, it is important that the construct will be something that we can work with so that we can reach a solution eventually.

TOOSI: It seems like the — there's very much a consensus on every side that the leadership is just terrible all around, and they all need to go. It's like that old saying, "Throw all the bums out," right?

But who do you replace them with, like, people you can't name because, if you name them, they might be tarred? I mean, what are we going to have, like, our first artificial intelligence-led authority? I don't know. Ghaith, I'm sorry.

What is something that should not be done as part of the reformation, or replacement, or whatever, of the Palestinian leadership?

AL-OMARI: Well, Look, I mean, first of all, I think it's — what should not be done is to say that we need a new leadership for Gaza. I think we need to have a more integrated approach that understands you need to have a national Palestinian leadership, because — both for political reasons but also for, actually, practical reasons. So that's one.

Have an integrated approach that deals with both the West Bank and Gaza, in terms of joining the institutions. Two, and here I agree with Eyal that it is not up to us to pick names, not only because it will discredit them, simply because it's just not, you know, it doesn't work that way.

I believe what we need to do is to insist on having structural reform in the Palestinian Authority and allow leaders to emerge through that process.

To my mind, it was — I mean, you know, when former —Prime Minister Salam Fayyad was prime minister, one thing that I found most fascinating in all of this — I mean, we all knew that Fayyad was a very capable individual. What was surprising to me is how many people — and I was a Palestinian official at that point — who, you know, I wouldn't, kind of, look at twice before that, suddenly started emerging and asserting themselves. There's plenty of talent there. Push for reform and allow this talent to emerge. So that's number two.

Number three, do not ask a new leadership to do impossible things, meaning — I mean, you know, I was talking to someone yesterday and they were saying, "Oh, the new Palestinian leadership should start by ending the pay-for-slay policy." Eh, ain't gonna happen. It's a very politically difficult thing.

So make sure that you do not ask the new leadership, which by its very nature would be shaky — we're trying to consolidate — do not start by asking for impossible things, for heavy lifts. Let's start focusing on things that matter on a day-to-day basis, whether it is clean governance, whether it is security, whether it's maintaining security coordination.

Sometimes, you know, we make the perfect the enemy of the good. And let's be modest, realistic, but at the same time, tackling some, I think, of the important issues that relate directly to the stability, whether in the West Bank or Gaza.

TOOSI: So I understand what you're saying about politically difficult choices, especially early on. But I do want to make the point that being a leader requires making politically difficult choices. Otherwise anybody could be a leader. So it's an important question to ask, but I think sequencing is a good point.

I want to ask a quick question about the interim force. There's, you know, all sorts of stuff floating out there, Turkish troops, American troops, some sort of Arab-led force. This is before we have, like, a PA or whatever-led ultimate authority. And after the heavy fighting, I mean, this is, kind of, how it's being defined, if not very well.

My sense, to be really honest, is it's just going to be Israel. I just want to know, quickly, what do you guys think about that? Eyal, your turn.

HULATA: Well, you know, I think this is one of the most complicated questions at this point, if not the most. Quite frankly, you know, I've been — I've been thinking about day-after strategy for several weeks now and been talking to many people and many factions. I think this is the problem that everybody recognizes but they don't have a solution.

I don't think that you'd expect, you know, foreign countries to come and police in Gaza. Some of the — you know, I mean, the Americans will never do this, nor will Israel ask them to. And the Turks, Israel, you know, definitely don't want a Turk-armed men on our borders, especially not after the way Erdogan supported Hamas and called Israel a terror organization, which, I mean, it's mind-blowing to think that we were in the process of trying to normalize our relationship with Turkey. But, you know, that's for a different podcast, perhaps.

I think that ultimately there could be an arrangement where the Arab countries in the region, you know, take upon this role. I don't see this happening at the moment. And I don't see the process that has given the right incentives and construct for that to happen.

I mean, the negotiation on the rules of engagement among themselves, you know, even before we understand that there could be crossfires with Israelis because security will demand Israeli presence there for this interim point in time, and everybody understands.

I think this will be very, very complicated, calls for a very delicate discussion between Israel and the other countries. I want to say I hope it happens, but unfortunately I'm not sure that it happens in this right way. And this indeed, I think, Nahal, you were touching on the most problematic issue at this hand, regarding this.

And then you reach a conclusion that there is no other choice; it's Israel. That's my worry, that if there is no other choice, it will be Israel. And the Gazans won't accept this. Of course, why would they? And Israel does not need to get back into this. Because, truly, we do not want to reoccupy Gaza. We shouldn't want to reoccupy Gaza. But if we start policing ourselves, that's as close as it can get.

So I am worried about that option. Hopefully, we'll reach a solution. And what I can say, I think, like other issues, because it's in none of the parties' interests that Israel will do this work and, again, provided that we're in the day after and Hamas is no longer there, I have a feeling that, you know, a solution will emerge even if it's creative and we cannot see it right now. I would like to think that. But at this point, I don't have the blueprint of how this would happen.

TOOSI: So one thing I'm hearing, and, again, I really don't know enough about this, but I am hearing that there's some talk floating out there about something similar to the multinational force and observers in the Sinai that might be under consideration.

I just want to throw that out there, but I am — I want to stress also that I really — I don't know enough about it. But I think it's, you know, worth chasing, which means I probably should chase it further. Hopefully, my editor is not watching.

Ghaith, same question on the interim force. Like, you know, let's say you're in charge. What — what do you do?

Let's just put you in charge. Why don't we do that? Go ahead.

(LAUGHTER)

HULATA: Not a bad idea, Nahal. Not a bad idea.

(LAUGHTER)

AL-OMARI: Sure. Look, I mean, that idea aside — instead maybe, actually, quickly, just to the last question, I mean, when I say difficult choices, look, I do believe that the Palestinian leadership should be clear on two things: commitment to a diplomatic outcome about two-state solution, meaning recognizing Israel, and the commitment to non-violence and fighting terror. These are the basics. But what I was trying to say is don't expect a new government to solve everything on day one, but rather, let's prioritize.

Look, I mean, here in terms of the international force, I think Israel has to make some trade-off and has to make its own decisions. At the end of the day, no force will come if Israel continues to insist that it will have indefinite security control over Gaza. No force will come and be seen either as collaborators with Israel or as — put itself in a situation where it will confront Israel.

And I had this conversation with some Arab officials, and that's exactly what they said. They said if you want us to play along, even talk about playing along, first of all, Israel have to get — put the right kind of diplomatic framing — again, two-state solution, transitional period until we get the Palestinian Authority. And two, we have to have security control.

This is almost impossible to imagine because for the reasons that Eyal mentioned, Israel feels that it needs to take security in its own hands. So ultimately, Israel, I believe, will end up having to be in charge from a security point of view for an interim period.

However, things don't stop here because it's very hard for me as well to imagine Israel having security control and some other countries, Arab or otherwise, to come and say, "OK, Israel does the security and we will come and deal with the civilian governance."

So for Israel, as it thinks about how it moves in this one, it has to understand that if it wants to continue having full security control, then by all probability, it will also have to be in charge of some of the civilian aspects of running Gaza, and if it doesn't want to do that, then it really has to start thinking right now of, what are the trade-offs? But I don't think that Israel can, you know, have its cake and eat it as well. Ultimately, there's prioritization and there are trade-offs, and if they don't, then you know, we go back to the old saying: You break it, you own it. And this is, I think, the trajectory that we are heading towards.

TOOSI: So, we do not have an answer on this question. I did not expect one, but I thought it would be foolish not to ask it.

So, I'm going to ask you a question that I'm sure you'll easily be able to answer. And Eyal, let's go with you because you brought it up earlier. When will we know that the war is over?

HULATA: Yeah, so you know, I think that's important because clearly, it is — it is understandable, and also recognized by the countries in the region that Hamas should stop ruling Gaza. But then comes the question, when do we know that they don't control Gaza, right? Especially because Israel will not pursue them 'til the last terrorists and the last gun.

I can tell you one of the necessary conditions, and then maybe give a — an idea of how we will know. Of course, the — one of the necessary conditions is the leadership because this current leadership unfortunately is not willing to negotiate any real end of ceasefire because the demands that they're putting for a ceasefire are completely absurd.

You know, to the point, I think that Sinwar would rather die as a shahid than anything else at this point. You know, he has done the most amount of damage that you could possibly imagine to Jews in Israel, and now, I think all that is left for his legacy is to die with this ideological pride, unfortunately. I hope I'm wrong. If I'm wrong, then we will know because there will be attempts to negotiate the continuation of the release of hostages. But this isn't the case.

So the leadership is one thing. Either they agree to meaningful terms of ceasefire, releasing all of the hostages, including the soldiers, all of them together, to relinquish power, because this is also something that the Arab countries around are saying, not only Israel and the United States. I don't see that happening, but you know, this is point number one.

Point number two has to do with the ability to call the shots in Gaza, and for that, I have, you know, a — an understanding of how things will happen. And Ghaith, I — I'd be happy to hear also your view on this.

And it was, I was national security advisor when we were negotiating the terms for a ceasefire in Rise of Dawn [sic, Operation Breaking Dawn]. It was only with Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Hamas did not participate in that. And of course, the Egyptians played a crucial role. And I knew that, you know, when the Egyptian picked up the phone and they spoke on the other side, you know, either Sinwar or someone on their behalf, the Egyptian could tell them what they think, but Hamas told them what they will do.

And that will be a change when the Egyptians call and someone picks up with the phone on the other side, and the Egyptians are capable of telling them, "Look, do you want to live or do you want to die? If you want to live, you'd better start doing as we say." Not because the Egyptians will kill them; because the situation will be in such a place. Egypt did not have this role, this leverage, this ability to affect what's happening in Gaza, I think, since Hamas took over, definitely deteriorated over time.

And this will be an interesting metric, because I think the Egyptians know this, and I think that you — if we put the rhetoric aside, when President Sisi, in his own tweet, said that in his vision, Gaza Strip needs to be demilitarized — and he did not say that in English or in Hebrew; he said that in Arabic to his own people. Of course, he said that this does need to be married to a solution and a political solution. Yeah, fine. But he knows the danger of Hamas also for the national security of Egypt.

So I think these are the kind of things we need to look for. For Israel perspective, it won't be enough just to get the leaders. We will need to have all of the hostages back, and the sooner, the better. This is the dilemma that the government is in, right? But they made this choice. They've done this truce for almost 10 days to get 86 of the hostages back. And this would have been extended if there was an option.

So those are materials that will play the role in saying that we're close to win.

TOOSI: Ghaith, that — I want you to answer this question, but I do want to make very quickly the point that as I reported in my story, Sisi's comments about the demilitarization element and some of the things he said have definitely been noticed by the Biden administration. That has made the rounds, and there is a sense that Egyptians are going to play a much bigger role than maybe a lot of people imagine — even those who think it is going to play a big role.

Go ahead, Ghaith, please. When — tell me when the war will be over.

AL-OMARI: Before I can even tell when the war will be over, I actually want to, since we're talking about Egypt, just maybe a few words here, and this is kind of— harkens back to a previous question you asked on what not to do.

I think it is essential that any ending of the fighting, we should give the lead to Egypt and to countries that share our view, our view in the US in terms of how to end this. I think the worst thing that we could do is to give the lead in negotiating an end of the war to countries that support Hamas, be it Qatar, be it Turkey. Because ultimately, they will look for terms that will help and support Hamas. We saw this in the 2014 war when the Qataris and the Turks tried to broker a ceasefire that would have been very advantageous to Hamas, because these are countries that have an interest in Hamas surviving and even strengthening.

So give the lead to countries that we know share our objectives, and Egypt both because of its, you know, political views, but also because of geography, would be the ideal country to do this.

How do we know the war is over? I believe this war — and first of all, I think we have to differentiate because we will, at some point, see a ceasefire, and it's very important to look at the terms of the ceasefire and ensure — I mean, to me, when I read the terms of the ceasefire, that tells me if the war is — if Hamas won or not because you look at the terms. If Hamas finds itself capable of negotiating a ceasefire that even gives it an iota of an advantage, then we know that the war did not end in the way that it was supposed to end.

But keep in mind that this is a war that will not end when a ceasefire is going to be — is signed. Yes, the ceasefire will maybe signal the end of the kind of major part of the operation, but given the nature of the objectives and given the nature, which is basically dismantling the capabilities of a very well-entrenched terror organization, I suspect that this is something that we will end up with a gray zone period which is not an active fight, but at the same time, not peace, for a while. And this, to my mind, is the most complicated one.

So we might have a formal ending to this war through, again, a UN resolution or a ceasefire or something, but I suspect that we will have a lower intensity period that will go on for months, if not years, after the major fighting is done.

TOOSI: This is interesting, this sort of reminds me of Yemen a little bit. You know, they negotiated a ceasefire, then they kind of renewed them for a while. Truces, whatever you want to call it, the word "ceasefire" is being poorly used in a lot of instances. And then they weren't able to renew a — the — the truce but somehow it unofficially held for quite a long time. And so there's been calm — relative calm in Yemen.

And so you're right, I mean, these gray zones do exist. It's not always — it doesn't always have to be something you put on paper. But let's say that we do reach the point of — where we're — there's a sense that we can build an interim force or we're even at the point where there's a new Palestinian governance structure being set up. Eyal, what is Iran going to be doing during this?

HULATA: So, you know, I mean, I think Ghaith remembers we participated together in a — in an event in another think tank here in Washington. Remember that? A few weeks before October 7. We were talking about the prospect of the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and many things were discussed.

I took the time I had just to talk about the spoilers of the process. You know, I have my issues with what could happen, and I said there are two major spoilers to this process — Iran and Hamas. I did not envision October 7, I don't think I had an advanced warning, you know? Even I didn't imagine that this will be so bad, but I knew that, you know, even with 30 rockets, Hamas could derail the process because a conflict will start and there we go.

Iran continues to be the sole beneficiary of the chaos in the Middle East, more than anybody else. Ghaith is right about Qatar, and I'm very angry at what they're doing, and I think that we should be more serious about using sticks with them as well.

Of course, Turkey, all of those countries that have — gave room for the radical political Islam of ruling — I mean, you know exactly what I'm talking about — this is bad for the region, this is bad for the Sunnis.

But, you know, to the extent we can agree or disagree about this, Iran and the use of proxies all throughout the Middle East, they've mastered this unfortunately. You've mentioned Yemen before. You know, Yemen is — how did they get to a position where they can fire ballistic missiles and interdict, you know, cruise vessels with helicopters? I mean, there's so few countries in the — Israel could do that. I don't — I'm not sure that there are many other countries in the Middle East can — that can do that. The Houthis can do that.

I mean, Iran is just using whatever they can in this. Clearly, they will want to derail this process. They will continue to be spoiling of this, and, you know, it's — you know, we remember in the past Iran tried their most and actually succeeded in derailing the processes in the past. They have been able to interdict. Every time, they've made it clear what they were thinking, they used their authority.

Of course, Hamas was the one that bombed the buses in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in the '90s that you recall and took over Gaza for the disengagement of this incident but Iran is always behind this thing, and increasingly so.

We will need to be mindful of that. We'll need to watch what's happening in the northern border with Hezbollah. And those issues will have an effect, and we'll need to be cognizant of spoilers, and within our plan, to have solutions for that. Otherwise, they will run back in and block the way.

TOOSI: And before we turn to Ghaith on this, I do just want to make the point that, you know, a spoiler is a spoiler if you allow them to be a spoiler. It — I know that sounds a little bit odd but if every time they do something it works and it spoils things and you can't make the decisions — the hard decisions on either side to press ahead, then the spoiler — the spoiler...

HULATA: Well, Nahal, I mean, I would want to agree with you but we need to look at the facts. 1,400 people slaughtered is quite a big spoiler, right?

TOOSI: Yeah.

HULATA: The number of buses that Hamas exploded in the '90s in the streets of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and other places. You know, the beginning, the Prime Minister at the time, the late Rabin, thought well, you know, let's not let them spoil the process and continue. This ended up in a sequence of events that eventually cost his own life.

TOOSI: Oh, sorry, guys. My editor is calling me.

HULATA: I guess he is watching the show.

TOOSI: ... oh my gosh, maybe she's watching. But no, look, I take your point...

HULATA: I mean, you know, I would want to say that we need to be always, you know, resilient to minor spoiling processes, but this is beyond imagination. I mean, what we've seen here, right, is off the charts.

But I do want to agree with you but we need to know — I think when Iran wants to spoil something, they don't play around, you know? They won't do something that is — if they do something and we don't respond, they will do something more, because eventually they want to stop the process.

So I'm not fond in letting those small problems become bigger before we address them, but I don't want to use this as an excuse. It's important for me to tell you and the audience about this.

We will need — I mean, this — this will — we will need to be strong if we want to have a better future in the region. It's true about Israel, it's true about the Palestinians, it's definitely true about the countries around.

TOOSI: And Ghaith, I'm going to let you talk about this while I send a note to my editor. Yep, here we go.

AL-OMARI: ... look, the only thing I have to add to what Eyal said is that — and I — and I agree, Iran is a country that thrives on chaos and instability. This is how they project power and this is what makes them kind of structurally a very problematic actor and one that one cannot do business with, because they don't share the same paradigm, I think, that some of the other countries share.

I would only add, not only do they thrive on chaos, they try to create chaos. The one thing that worries me as I look around the region during this period is to look at Iran actually trying to destabilize a country like Jordan. And they are trying to destabilize it, both in terms of messaging but also in practical terms, where they're giving their Iraqi militias to camp on the Jordanian-Iraqi borders, increasing the weapon and drug smuggling from Syria, also done by the Iranian proxies.

So Iran is a country that will do everything to benefit the — from this. How do you deal with this? I believe you have to deal with it in two ways. First of all, we do need to have a muscular approach to Iran. If Iran hits us or our allies, we have to respond. I mean, to my mind, it baffles the mind that the Iranians and their proxies are attacking U.S. forces on almost daily basis. I think a daily basis. And our response is yet been — you know, sometimes we've responded, but not certainly of the same magnitude that they're doing it.

And as Eyal rightly said, the Iranians, if they think they smell weakness, they will push. So that's kind of one element. We have to think in terms of how do you respond, but I think maybe related to your question, Nahal, earlier in terms of, yes, we do know spoilers will spoil. The question is how do you react? And I can tell you from my experience when I was a P.A. official, Hamas would attack Israel, and that was in the late '90s, early 2000s, and the Israelis will retaliate against the Palestinian Authority.

This kind of approach even actually makes it more attractive for any spoiler to come and say I'm going to do the spoiling and my opponent's going to get hit, so why not. So I think we have to think really more exhaustively in the ways of how do you make sure that the response to spoilers is done in a certain way that does not weaken potential allies but rather done in a way that actually directly hurts the spoilers and not only the spoilers but actually their backers.

At the end of the day, you know, we've seen many instances in the past. Hamas will conduct a terror attack in the West Bank. Israel would not react against the Hamas leadership in Gaza. It would react in a very localized way.

At the end of the day, gave a message to a leadership of Hamas in Gaza and elsewhere that they can continue doing this and, frankly, with very little cost to themselves or to their power base.

TOOSI: Quick follow up on this for Eyal. Are Israeli settlers a spoiler?

HULATA: You know, I think, of course, the settlement issue is — has always been in the center of everything that anyone that is talking about this. I'm — you know, I think the presence of the settlers at this point is not a spoiler in itself. Definitely when we understand that Israel has withdrawn completely from Gaza Strip to the last house, to the last grave, to the last soldier, and this conflict has become even more violent than it was before with Hamas with no settlements in the region.

And, you know, Hamas will try to say that they're fighting also for the Palestinians in the West Bank. I think we all know that this is not what they're actually trying to do. They will just continue to resist because it's not about our presence there.

Having said that, I am worried about the intensified violence in West Bank also by Israeli extremists. And the fact that the IDF is responding more vigorously on that understanding that this can evolve into a deterioration, an escalating situation and doing more so in the recent weeks than in the beginning of the war, I think this is very, very important because Israel does recognize this issue. Of course, in this current Israeli government it's more difficult to do some of the measures. I mean, things were more in control in previous government and also in previous Netanyahu governments than they are right now.

This is what there is. I think that in an Israeli context, their ability of a government to control the various factions is more serious than in other issues. I mean, we are — even if sometimes we don't look like that, we're a serious country, we have authority, we have security establishment, we have the IDF, we don't have groups, you know, doing what they want the way that Palestinian Islamic Jihad will do to Hamas and Hamas will do the PA and everything will be blended in some way. I don't think it happened that way in Israel, but Israel does need to make sure that the radical factions, unfortunately some of them are violent, are controlled and maintained, of course.

And Prime Minister Netanyahu knows that. He also talked about this.

TOOSI: Yes. He has talked about many things, your prime minister. Ghaith, you should feel free to respond to that, but actually I'm going to ask the next question and you can tackle both.

We could have our own leadership change in the United States in the coming year. How do you see the U.S. approach to the conflict changing if Donald Trump or another Republican wins the White House in 2024?

AL-OMARI: Let me first respond to the question about settlers. I mean...

TOOSI: Oh, that's the easier question. OK, go ahead.

(LAUGHTER)

AL-OMARI: Yes. As I am thinking about what is said it's less complicated. Look, I mean, actually I agree with Eyal obviously on this one. I agree with Eyal both in the sense that I believe that the issue of settlements is one of the issues that helped build a narrative among the Palestinians that there is no Israeli partner. And this is not only a West Bank issue. This is a Palestinian issue. The same way that terror — and I'm not equating the two, but the same way that terror brings a narrative on Israel that Palestinians are not serious about peace. I think settlements build that narrative, but that's for maybe for a future conversation.

I do believe, though, that the issue of settler violence is one that is a core issue. I mean, you know, people talk about second front. I'm more worried about the West Bank than I'm, I would say, about Lebanon right now because of this.

And here, I mean, we talked a lot about the need to change the Palestinian leadership. I think we also need to start talking about what's the future of Israel because when you have a government, when you have members of a government who give political legitimacy to a lot of these violent actors, and yes, not all settlers are violent but yet there is a violent fringe, and you have cabinet ministers, Itamar Ben-Gvir, Smotrich and others, who basically are saying this is OK that we have a serious problem here, and I don't see how we can do business with a government like this.

In terms of the US, look, it's — I mean, it's an impossible question to answer simply because we don't know what the next administration will do. I can tell — all I can tell you is the following, that without U.S. leadership, be it Republican or Democrat, it's very hard to imagine how any of these scenarios that we're talking about, Arab forces, international forces, day after, et cetera, can be done.

At the end of the day, you know. We've been talking about having the Arabs play a role. You know, inter-Arab relations are so fraught and so tense, and I can't think of any two Arab countries that trust one another. And without having the US providing the glue and the leadership to build these kind of coalitions, I mean, without the US showing that we are willing in this country to also risk some of our own assets as we ask some of our partners to risk their own assets, it's very hard for me to imagine how these kind of international coalitions the day after, whatever it's going to look like, can be built.

So if we end up with a next administration that takes an isolationist approach, again, be it Democratic, be it Republicans, too early to tell. I think none of these issues that we're discussing will come to fruition, and we'll end up with a model along this.

I think one thing that this administration has learned, that, you know, what we've been doing and what the previous administration has been doing, which is basically disengagement from the Middle East, is very risky because at the end of the day the Middle East will impose some on us and it is, I'm sure, for administration that wanted to focus on China and Russia having the president, the secretary of state, and others spend most of their time in recent weeks being desk officers for Palestine-Israel is a reminder that this is something that you can — that we have to deal with, we have to deliver on. It doesn't mean we have to over-invest but we cannot ignore it.

TOOSI: Eyal, please feel free to respond to the Trump/Republican potential win question, but I — since we're getting a bit short on time, I also want to ask you if there's a question that you want to ask Ghaith? And then Ghaith, I'll give you the same opportunity. So why don't you just tackle those together?

HULATA: Yeah, so I'll skip the question about American politics. As a foreigner, you know, I should — I have things to say but I guess I'd rather not.

But I will use the opportunity — thank you, Nahal, for asking that. Ghaith, I want to ask you mentioned Jordan before. I want to ask you a little bit more about the Jordanian position and role in this. I mean, you said — of course you talked about the Iranian interest in breaking them from within. This has been the case for a long time. Israel, I think, played a crucial role in helping Jordan keep secure and intact throughout the decades. You know this, of course, very well.

I think that from all of the countries around us, the only country that is having problems with condemning terror the way they should, unfortunately it's Jordan. And I — I'd be happy to hear your perspective on this.

TOOSI: And we only have about five minutes left total. I just want to throw that in there. Go ahead.

AL-OMARI: Look, I mean, Jordan, I think, is — I mean, I have not been worry — this worried about Jordan since the 1980s. I think they are dealing with the most difficult set of challenges that we have seen. I mean, we saw, I think yesterday or the day before — I'm losing track of time — there was general strike in — et cetera, in support not only of Gaza but frankly of Hamas. The Muslim Brotherhood is — feels emboldened, et cetera. And I feel that many in the Jordanian, at least the security establishment, are very — getting very uneasy about what is happening.

So for Jordan, I think they are dealing with some serious domestic challenges, and I think it's important for us, from the outside, to recognize this and not to push them. You know, we should push them privately maybe but not to push them publicly to do things that might endanger their own internal stability.

I want to zoom out of it and say while you're right, Eyal, I do think that under Bibi and not only under this government, even in previous Bibi governments, Jordanian-Israeli relations have become so toxic. It is very unfortunate that you have these relations which I believe are key not only for the Jordanians but, you know, also for the Israelis, be — you know, just being maintained only by the security establishments, simply because there is zero trust on the political level between the King and Bibi. The Jordanians believe that Bibi is their out — is out there to get them.

And I think unless we deal with this, we will find the situation there where Jordan will not feel motivated to engage in a robust way with the Israelis. But for now, I would say, with the Jordanians, just this is not the time for posturing, this is the time to actually have a private conversation to understand their concerns and see where they can move and where they cannot move and take the lead from them.

At this moment, this is a very crucial time for Jordan.

TOOSI: And what's your question for Eyal? And we have about — you'll have about two minutes, Eyal. Go ahead.

AL-OMARI: My question actually relates to a point from a bit earlier, I mean, do you see any way in which the current Israeli government is capable of engaging in some of these key points that are required, in my opinion, to get the Arabs and others engaged? Can we see any way that this Israeli government can say, you know, "yes, we want a — unified with a Palestinian leadership to ultimately rule Gaza and we want this to be part of ultimately reaching a two-state solution?" Is this — any way that this can happen or are we — do we have to wait for a day of — for a day after, not Gaza but rather after Bibi and company?

HULATA: Look, I think that, to be truthful, the prospect of this government to resolve the strategic problem that Israel is facing is very slim. I mean, you know, I think 2023 turns out to be one of the worst years in Israel's history. That was true before October 7th, let alone after October 7th.

And I won't dwell much in — into that and in — into our politics but I think that the current government is not capable in constructing something meaningful to the future. But I do want to say that I think also, in a new government in Israel, some of the things that have been said will be difficult to implement.

I think it is important to use this time to say that the sentiment in the Israeli street in general, we've moved back a lot in the trust that Israelis can give in neighbors. I wouldn't say that, you know, a — overwhelmingly on the Arabs, but specifically on the conflict with the Palestinians and specifically with the Gazans, you know, I've — I've — I — we're — we're a family of the family — of my family living in Kfar Azza and that they're displaced from their homes. Just to think of what it will take for them to come back and what that means. We're way beyond talking about the point of governance.

What I do understand is that a new government will need and will also — hopefully will be able to talk in terms of a political horizon so that we can have something going on and something starting, hopefully, eventually can — we — will lead to that point.

This government is not capable of doing this. A new government will — hopefully will. And we will need this because we will need a new framework for the Middle East, that's for sure.

TOOSI: And Eyal, just to be clear, when you say the current Israeli government, you're talking about the elected government, you're not talking about the War Cabinet?

HULATA: No, no, I'm talking about the elected government. The War Cabinet...

TOOSI: Gotcha.

Future Gaza: Options and Considerations for the Day After the War

*Featuring Eyal Hulata and Ghaith Al-Omari
Moderated by Nahal Toosi
Introductory remarks by Jonathan Schanzer*

HULATA: ... you know, Israel does not have a unity government. Netanyahu refused to build a unity government. If he didn't refuse, this wouldn't have been the government. We have a War Cabinet. I'm very happy to — its performance. I think that the two very serious people, Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, are doing a crucial role. The fact that Benny Gantz [sic, Gadi Eisenkot] lost his son during this war says a lot about the way that this has been playing out.

No, no, I was talking about the government path of Israel, the elected government of Israel, yes.

TOOSI: It's certainly — it's certainly — definitely. Listen, we're almost out of time. I do just want to make one point before we go cause this was really wonderful. I have so many other questions. But, you know, I am not sure I like the term "political horizon." A horizon is something you can never really reach. I understand the idea of hope and that's something you shoot for, but horizon? I don't know.

Thanks, everybody. I really, really appreciate this. This was a really great conversation. Let's do it again sometime.

HULATA: We will. Thank you so much.

AL-OMARI: Thank you — thank you so much.

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