



Gaza: Leadership and Reconstruction for the “Day After”

By Sultan Barakat and Paul Porteous

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Reconstruction approaches to “day after” scenarios for Gaza must adapt to new realities in which the nature of conflict has blurred the distinction between “planning” and “implementation” phases. Leadership for reconstruction must be a creative learning process that supports the transition by which occupation ends, sovereignty begins, communities are strengthened, and justice and reconciliation are achieved. International protection, potentially through a UN Transitional Authority for Gaza, can create an environment for this work, based on new approaches to local engagement that extends reconstruction beyond infrastructure to include questions of identity, social cohesion, political reconciliation, sovereignty, justice, economic development, and cultural renaissance.

Introduction

Gaza in ruins, looming famine, millions displaced, a region on the edge of war, and the demise of the international system. Yet again, as we confront the horrors of massacres and human rights abuses across Gaza and the West Bank, focus turns to the “day after” and the need for a “humanitarian response.” We have been here before—after 1948, 1956, 1967, 1979, 1987, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2021. The dates roll off the page just like the more than 130 United Nations (UN) Resolutions, commencing shortly after the world body’s founding. The immediate needs of the population of Gaza overwhelm the capacity to plan ahead in such a volatile and fast changing environment. Within both literature and practice, the distinction between reconstruction as humanitarian aid, relief, recovery, and development are muddled at best.¹ However, simply waiting in hope for the conflict to end before taking action is no longer an option. The nature of conflict is changing and so must the notion of “reconstruction” adapt in response to this new reality.

Reconstruction should have as its primary purpose the welfare and advancement of the Palestinian people in a safe and stable region. Yet, multiple objectives for reconstruction in the past have subsumed Palestinian welfare to donor priorities, inter-agency competition, Israeli military control, and a myopic focus on infrastructure projects. This leaves critical issues around political, social, and cultural reconciliation unresolved. The situation now facing Gaza is unprecedented in its destruction and dislocation of the population (see “Current Reality” below).

In adapting to this new reality, notions of reconstruction must go beyond the self-interest of nations, organizations, and political factions. Failures in the past have not been in terms of technical reconstruction planning but rather in establishing the protections and environment to work through critical national reconciliation issues. Reconstruction strategies have also left local Palestinian groups behind, either failing to invite them to decision-making forums or framing Palestinians as the object of development rather than its chief facilitators and implementers. Instead, reconstruction must be re-imagined as contributing to the transition by which occupation ends, sovereignty begins, communities are strengthened, and justice and reconciliation are achieved.

The Current Reality

As of September 2024, the UN reports almost 41,000 killed (two-thirds women and children)¹, although modelling suggests the number of deaths may be higher than 186,000.² In January 2024, the UN/World Bank/European Union Interim Assessment Report estimated direct damage to infrastructure of around U.S. \$18.5 billion, equivalent to 97 percent of the combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the West Bank and Gaza. It will take decades to make safe unexploded munitions and clear the estimated 39 million tons of rubble. Unemployment is over 79 percent, and there is a complete collapse of the education system, health system, food, water, and electrical distribution systems. Disaster does not even begin to describe this catastrophe, with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling that Israeli military actions risk irreparable harm to the right of Palestinians to be protected from genocide and declaring in an Advisory Opinion the ongoing occupation as unlawful under international law.³ The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory recent report describes a “coercive environment” in violation of international human rights law, based on an erosion of economic, social, and cultural rights, the expropriation and exploitation of land and natural resources,

and a litany of violent crimes under international criminal law and crimes against humanity.

The international system (with the UN at its core) is seemingly powerless to respond, with major nations and international organizations paralyzed by the conflict and either unable or unwilling to intervene. The rest of the world is equally stunned—from protesting citizens, divided political parties, non-government organizations and even many nations—all reduced to bystanders witnessing the purposeful destruction of a people and its culture. The relentless attacks on key infrastructure including hospitals, universities, museums, and cultural heritage strikes at the heart of the Palestinian identity. These attacks have led to growing criticism worldwide and from high-profile decisionmakers including senior Israeli politicians, the UN Secretary-General⁴ and International Criminal Court Prosecutor⁵ as representing a calculated and deliberate collective punishment.

The results of this paralysis are already obvious but will potentially become worse—with Gaza uninhabitable, its population traumatized, barely able to survive and the whole region destabilized. Gaza is re-defining our understanding of the nature of conflict and post-conflict trajectories. At this point, the conflict defies having an “end” and requires immediate action to provide international protection. In the absence of a traditional “day after,” reconstruction risks, as has happened in the past, building mistrust and disappointment and failing to address critical issues around power imbalance, justice, and human rights. Failure to undertake the leadership required to address these underlying power dynamics lays the foundation for intergenerational trauma which will be the basis of the next conflict, and future ones as well.

It would be remiss not to mention who benefits from the status quo and continuing conflict. Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu’s domestic political survival seems tied to a prolonged war. A litany of legal prosecutions await him both domestically on corruption charges and possibly internationally for war crimes. The immunity offered by his political office (reliant on extreme right-wing parties) and the emergency mandate (justified by the ongoing war) is the only shield protecting him.

Additionally, the status quo suits arms manufacturers, which are reported to have doubled their share values,⁶ and project immense profits from US \$95 billion in new weapons sales for continuing wars worldwide.⁷ Nations most able to influence these conflicts through control of armaments express shock at “tragic events” that occur when their weapons are used in dense civilian “safe areas,” resulting in catastrophic, widespread, and entirely predictable civilian deaths. It is no surprise that cynicism runs deep across the world.

International Political Paralysis

If anything, international paralysis has become more pronounced with the current widespread destruction. Each possibility of progress hits a wall of unresolved underlying dynamics which seem to raise more questions than answers. Perhaps most notably (though, by no means, an exhaustive list of examples):

- ▶ Not only is Gaza virtually uninhabitable, its economic viability has been destroyed. To what extent can social and political cohesion be maintained in that environment?

- ▶ Israel has already created extensive military buffer zones and split Gaza. Will it break up Gaza in the same way as the West Bank and, thus, fragment the Palestinian people, their land, identity, and culture?
- ▶ There is no sign of a “political horizon”—Israel has no plans for a “day after,” the Knesset has reaffirmed its rejection of a Palestinian State, and the majority of Israelis are against a Palestinian State.
- ▶ The assassination of Ismail Haniyeh on July 31, 2024, has scuttled efforts to negotiate a ceasefire and have led Hamas’ political leadership to move from one of the most moderate leaders to Yahya Sinwar, the man Israel accused of masterminding the October 7 attacks.
- ▶ Mass exodus of Palestinians from Gaza (to Egypt) and from the West Bank (to Jordan) is still a possibility—either forcibly or through desperate refugee movements which would seriously destabilize neighboring countries.
- ▶ Hamas and Fatah (Palestinian Authority) are still divided. Previous attempts to bring them together in Transitional Governance arrangements have been unsuccessful, and current attempts by Russia and China are also muted.
- ▶ Hamas acted as a local government providing a wide range of services. Who will take over that role?
- ▶ In Israel, political divisions have deepened—what does this mean for the longer-term stability and security of Israel itself?
- ▶ The US, as a staunch supporter and chief arms supplier to Israel, has encountered its own domestic resistance during an election year and squandered its reputation and credibility as a mediator in the region.
- ▶ Hezbollah and Israel continue to engage in conflict in the north and the potential for a wider war in Lebanon, even a civil war, remains high.
- ▶ Iran has already demonstrated it is willing to confront Israel and the United States in military terms, along with its militant fighters in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Assassinations have put the region on high alert for triggering possible widespread war.
- ▶ Saudi Arabia is still pursuing normalization with Israel—but only in exchange for access to its nuclear program and advanced weapons from the United States, which is opposed by many members of the U.S. Congress.
- ▶ Countries across the Global South are now openly critical of Western bias and the double-standards of the “international community,” thereby undermining the notion of a rules-based international order.⁸
- ▶ There is an increased likelihood of international terrorism as a result of the international failure to stop the continuation of violence in Gaza.

These challenges have not suddenly appeared. They are rooted in history, culture, geopolitics, colonialism, religion, and violence over decades. They are further exacerbated by power imbalances and external influences, blurring the distinction between “conflict” and “post-conflict” periods, and “planning” and “implementation” phases. This has huge implications for “the day after” and a reconstruction effort that results in justice for the Palestinian people, reconciliation with Israel, and a durable peace in Gaza.

Reconstruction without Transition

Reconstruction is not an end in itself but the means to transition to rebuild a better, safer, and thriving community. However, conceptualized as a participatory process, reconstruction has often failed even at the first hurdle of inclusiveness. For example, the 2009 Sharm al-Sheikh Reconstruction Conference included over 70 states and 16 international organizations but failed to include a single Gaza-based organization. Several important factors were identified that continue to be obstacles to reconstruction including:⁹

- ▶ Limited local influence over damage assessments, which resulted in reconstruction priorities not reflective of local concerns
- ▶ A lack of transparency in how donor funds are distributed
- ▶ Political conditionality on the disbursement of funds, resulting in some requirements which are impossible to meet
- ▶ Continued Israeli blockade which inhibits the free flow of people and goods necessary for reconstruction
- ▶ Conflicting regional agendas, with some nations only aligning with their proxy Palestinian factions

The Israeli blockade, which commenced in 2007 following the election of Hamas, controls what comes in and out of Gaza in terms of goods and movement of people. The later Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) in 2014 was promoted as a step forward in donor cooperation, but was stymied by still giving priority to Israeli security control before Palestinian welfare. In practice, it had nothing to say about Palestinian identity, social cohesion, political reconciliation or economic development. The result was to effectively give Israel a veto over critical movements of materials required for reconstruction. The UN was left policing reconstruction efforts which had the perverse effect of reinforcing the legitimacy of the Israeli blockade.¹⁰

Israeli Government policy ensures the region remains undeveloped. Blocking entry of “dual-use” materials resulted in the closure of 90 percent of industry (such as furniture and engineering firms) between 2005 and 2022.¹¹ Nor has reconstruction necessarily contributed to growing the Palestinian economy, with “siege profiteering” seeing up to 72 percent of international aid for the occupied territories ultimately end up in Israel’s economy.¹² For example, in supplying cement to Gaza, an Israeli company Neshet, makes substantial profits by controlling 85 percent of the cement market.¹³

In the absence of the hard leadership work of reconciliation, the GRM became a bureaucratic “mechanism” which ultimately failed its goals of development and security. Under its watch, Hamas was able to re-arm, attack Israel and still have sufficient weapons to continue fighting in Gaza throughout the current conflict.

Social Leadership for Reconstruction

From a leadership perspective, any reconstruction needs to be based first and foremost on the welfare of the Palestinian people as a social and humanitarian endeavor. This embraces a more inclusive concept of “reconstruction” covering political and governance institution building and stability; economic reforms and financial security; and humanitarian and social reconciliation. The assumptions underlying more limited concepts of reconstruction which maintain Israeli control and entrench the occupation must be challenged, especially in light of the ICJ advisory opinion that the occupation is illegal.¹⁴ Key assumptions about traditional reconstruction which need to be challenged include the following (see Box 1):

BOX 1: KEY ASSUMPTIONS TO BE CHALLENGED

- ▶ Reconstruction contributes to a long-term political settlement (when it often entrenches illegal occupation rather than supports a two-state solution).
- ▶ Reconstruction contributes to institutional capacity building (when it often undermines local decision-making).
- ▶ Reconstruction will drive economic activity (when often industries in the local economy do not benefit).
- ▶ Aid promised is actually delivered (when in the past only half of promised aid has been provided).
- ▶ Major factions such as Hamas can be ignored without negative consequences (when those controlling local social and economic activity need to be involved to achieve real results).
- ▶ Israel must control reconstruction on the basis of security (when it actively acts as an obstacle to the movement of goods and also profits from limiting supply and restricts humanitarian aid).

Maintaining these assumptions cannot form the basis of a reconstruction strategy because their effects are to restrict development. Instead, the best way to formulate long-term integrated strategies is for them to be based on the welfare of the Palestinian people through local engagement. Breaking free of this paradigm requires a social leadership which works with local communities to explore their unique context and immediate challenges and devolves decision-making based on joint learning and experimentation.¹⁵ This frames issues as “shared dilemmas” which require immediate response, rather than a “planning” phase for an uncertain and unspecified future followed by an “implementation” phase triggered by particular events (e.g., a ceasefire).

This means addressing critical dynamics that work against this purpose, including in terms of technical dependency, authority dependency, and missing conversations (see Box 2):

BOX 2: CRITICAL OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE PEACEBUILDING

- ▶ **Technical dependency:** International responses to conflict have been excessively reliant on technical, logistical, and managerial processes and solutions. This avoids the underlying power imbalances and issues such as injustice, inequality, racism, and exploitation which are the source of the conflict. Left unresolved, these underlying issues explode across the region and the world in the form of protests and violence.
- ▶ **Authority dependency:** Communities have become dependent on authorities resolving conflict issues, whether through diplomacy, mediation, bullying, dominance or outright military attacks. This reinforces tribalism (“you are either with us or against us”) and stops the important community engagement necessary to work across differences.
- ▶ **Missing conversations:** Within divided communities, difficult values conversations which could help heal divisions and factionalism are absent.

Applied to the present context in Gaza, these obstacles are fundamental to building a just and durable peace in fragile states and territories:

1. Technical dependency

Periods of uncertainty are characterized by adaptive challenges which emerge from competing values (often expressed as tension and conflict), and require the exercise of leadership to engage different perspectives and question basic values and assumptions. It is important to distinguish between technical challenges (solved through the application of expertise and past experience and requiring no change in values or culture) and adaptive or wicked challenges (underlying dynamics which require a new evolutionary step in problem-solving processes).¹⁶ Social leadership focuses on these values contradictions in order to create new ways of understanding and generate solutions. For example, in the Gaza crisis, a major contradiction is that in the name of “security,” many military actions are creating a less secure and stable environment—which will likely lead to continuing multi-generational conflict, rather than stabilizing the situation.

External players contribute to these contradictions in pursuing technical solutions to be “seen to be doing something.” For example, the Israeli Government refuses to fully open border crossings for humanitarian aid despite Provisional Orders by the ICJ.¹⁷ Instead of upholding international law and protecting human rights, the U.S. built a temporary pier in Gaza at a cost of U.S. \$320 million with the associated objective that no U.S. soldier would set foot in Gaza (hence relying on Israeli soldiers to secure it on land).¹⁸ The pier broke apart a week after it became operational and was fully dismantled in July 2024. In two months of operation, it delivered the equivalent of a single day’s pre-war land aid.¹⁹ The continuing Israeli offensive in South Gaza has resulted in aid still not being delivered to areas of most need. The temporary pier was largely ineffective and acted as a distraction to the real issue.

The assumption that technocratic approaches will yield results in values-based conflict situations is insufficient in our hyper-polarized world. For example, the reduction in many parts of Western nations to “Palestinian = Arab = Islam = Terrorist” in itself creates even more divisions and has emboldened extremist viewpoints within Israel. Reframing the Gaza conflict as “religious” misses important opportunities to reduce tension and engage with differences. Similarly, a focus on “Islamophobia” misses the important broader “anti-Arab” racism that is increasingly being peddled by right-wing organizations throughout the world.²⁰ In the same way, allowing the widely discredited definition of “antisemitism” (which equates it with criticism of Israeli government policies) to be a guiding principle,²¹ has inflamed communities rather than united them. In some cases, these definitions have been hijacked by right-wing politicians as a way of countering any opposition or criticism. Blindly adopting this simplification, as some institutions in Germany and the United States have done, creates more tension and polarization, shutting down community discourse, silencing protesters, and preventing the effective engagement required to deal with difficult values issues. Politicians, their constituents are assured, are the ones to deal with these complex issues, not citizens.

2. Authority dependency

A second dynamic which leads to paralysis is that in periods of uncertainty, communities tend to rely on authorities to provide answers. The region has already suffered from too many political authorities simply gratifying their own factions without reaching across divides. This risks developing a culture of dependency on authorities or experts, which may act as a brake on important work within and between communities as they instead wait for authorities to intervene and resolve the problems. For example, the extraordinary focus on “mediation” attempts by senior U.S. officials and a focus on authority personalities, such as Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu or U.S. President Biden, can suffocate other initiatives. The work of reconciling competing values is instead displaced by a focus on advocacy and lobbying of authorities.

Rather than focusing the authority on the real challenges, these strategies of influence reinforce the authority’s limited view and further reduce room for communities to maneuver. Many initiatives promoting peace across Israeli and Palestinian community groups have collapsed in this highly polarized environment. Alternatively, authorities are blamed for a situation or may even become a source of conflict. Refocusing away from authorities allows communities to diagnose their environment, internal relationships, and recognize new partners. Effort and energy are returned to key issues, instead of being centralized around individuals, representatives, experts, and authorities.

Closely linked is the demise in “trust” in authorities. Trust is plummeting in politicians, diplomats, soldiers, government officials, regional neighbors, and the international system as a whole. In the absence of trust, groups seek “guarantees.” However, there are no guarantees in the absence of some form of enforcement. The ICJ and International Criminal Court (ICC) have no effective enforcement mechanism. The UN itself has no enforcement mechanism. Even if the UN Security Council (UNSC) decided to enforce a ceasefire, it is reliant on member nations to send troops—which they are increasingly reluctant to do.

Declining trust is reflected in proposals to establish a ceasefire, which are mired in competing narratives. Hamas talks of end goals and permanent ceasefire while Israel talks about mechanisms for continuing discussions and making no commitments about a permanent ceasefire. This is reflected in the current

proposal endorsed by the UN Security Council,²² where an initial 6-week ceasefire period is to be extended for as long as the parties need to negotiate a permanent truce that includes the withdrawal of Israeli troops from populated areas—but there are no time limits. The second and third phases of the proposal call for “*a permanent end to hostilities*” and “*the major reconstruction of Gaza*,” however there is still no timetable. This is crucial, as previous attempts at peace processes have either specified an end outcome but without the steps necessary to achieve it (e.g., two-state solution) or specified open-ended steps of negotiations without clarity about the end outcome.

U.S. President Biden in his White House speech stated: “*If Hamas fails to fulfill its commitments under the deal, Israel can resume military operations.*”²³ This has significant impact—the “day after” may simply be a return to conflict. How is failure to fulfill commitments to be decided? And by whom? We have already seen the ICJ case revolve around multiple interpretations of acts of Genocide and the ICC around War Crimes. Israel continues to insist it has not breached any international law and effectively ignores any Provisional Orders by the ICJ. The United States has mostly agreed, continued to arm Israel and condemned the ICC as “outrageous” for suggesting that Prime Minister Netanyahu should be called to account for war crimes.²⁴ This has resulted in the U.S. having diminished credibility in the region as its “red-lines” are continually ignored with impunity by the Israeli Government. So which authority would oversee the enforcement of a Ceasefire Plan which is such an integral part of reaching and maintaining the “day after?”

3. Missing Conversations

A third dynamic is the avoidance of sensitive values conversations which are essential to reconciliation. The continued call for the Palestinian people to have a “united” front in dealing with Israel is misplaced. A thriving community should be able to hold a diversity of views as a way of generating new options. The split between Fatah and Hamas is one manifestation of unresolved adaptive challenges facing the Palestinian people. Attempts by Russia and China to bridge the gap between these parties have so far been unsuccessful. Even within Hamas there are different perspectives, with a military wing, political wing, and local government wing. The Palestinian diaspora is equally diverse in its identity. Re-formulated, this is not just a dispute between factions but competing values in the community. This means conversations on how self-governance will operate need to be decided by the community and go beyond traditional interpretations of reconstruction. This is the work of social leadership: to engage people around their current reality and future aspirations, revealing contradictions, posing critical questions around assumptions, and re-framing challenges to empower groups. It needs to capture attention long enough for groups to be able to work on underlying issues when communities would rather avoid them.

Localism

James Scott’s (1998) book *Seeing like a State*, highlights how, in times of stress, institutional focus often shifts to technical solutions and expert advice (“*techné*”) at the expense of less tangible local knowledge and experience.²⁵ States tend to only see top-down solutions, which emphasize central control and reliance on experts, often failing to take account of broader local knowledge built up over many generations. In contrast, Scott uses the Greek term “*métis*” to emphasize the importance of local knowledge, which is often learnt through practical local experience and learnt through doing rather than formal processes.

Too many consultative practices focus exclusively on the technical, logistical, and management aspects of implementation and planning, leaving many of the values-based issues of unequal power relationships unresolved. Nor do they address the thorny question of localism, involving the devolution and transfer of decision-making power to a local level.²⁶ Instead, values and power issues are reframed as “conflict” issues, to be dealt with through resolution or mediation processes, rather than being accepted as part of community discourse. By focusing the spotlight on only some aspects of a problem (e.g., reconstruction) and de-emphasizing others (e.g., occupation), these processes may result in limiting local communities’ capacity to creatively address the underlying dynamics.

The Challenge of Local Engagement

Positively, at the Jordan Humanitarian Aid conference in June 2024, UN Development Program (UNDP) stated that it should be “*A Palestinian-owned process, through alignment with national planning, and a people centered approach—ensuring that communities and civil society are engaged, and have their say.*”²⁷ This is consistent with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the first principle of which is ownership: “*developing countries set their own strategies for poverty reduction, improve their institutions and tackle corruption.*”²⁸ Similarly, the Recovery Framework for Gaza, proposed by the Ministerial Committee for the Reconstruction of Gaza in 2015, states that:²⁹

- ▶ Local governments will participate in and contribute to detailed project planning;
- ▶ Recovery will be inclusive of all stakeholders, including vulnerable and marginalized groups;
- ▶ Affected communities will encourage public participation in recovery.

However, despite international conferences, without international protection for such processes, it is still uncertain how this will actually be implemented. Faced with Gaza’s radical new reality, passive “engagement” processes are inadequate and can stifle creativity. Past experience suggests an enormous gulf exists in perceptions between donors and local groups, which remain unresolved. This may lead some groups to withdraw from engagement, which risks alternative voices in the community being silenced and discussions going underground. Such vacuums risk being filled with blame, rumor, and hearsay. In generating a local approach, divisive issues need to be re-framed away from blame to emphasize partnerships and a shared responsibility for generating solutions.

Higher Education is a good example of immediate reconstruction practice. With over 70,000 students displaced and the destruction of all Universities, numerous regional organizations are already taking action based on local engagement. They are bringing together teachers and students through virtual learning platforms as a way of maintaining and building on Palestinian scholarship, culture, and identity. Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, including novel ways of twinning with other universities, distance education, and certification through alternative institutions outside Gaza can be immediately implemented while the longer-term re-establishment of a vibrant Higher Education sector occurs. This transcends conflictual politics to instead focus on building capacity and the foundations for current and future generations. It helps develop communities with vision to strengthen the capacity for long-term responses, rather than just looking to “leaders” and “authorities” for vision.

Engagement becomes an exercise of leadership rather than the precursor to it, with localism a key strategy in identifying priorities and progress. However, this cannot be achieved without the international community creating a safe environment for local solutions to be generated. The continuing invasion of Gaza, destruction of the economy, health, and education systems, and wide scale land theft and attacks in the West Bank make this critical work impossible without that protection.

International Order and Protection— Recommendations

If the ultimate goal is peace in the region, to the benefit of both Palestinians and Israelis, the international community cannot wait for politically convenient ceasefires or external authorities to impose solutions. Essential to progress is to bring Gaza and the West Bank under “international protection” based on human rights through the auspices of the UN. Such an arrangement would likely be for a period of 3-5 years until a fully functional Palestinian State can be realized based on “self-determination” and “self-governance.”³⁰ The goal must be for Palestinians to live in peace and security with dignity, have opportunities to study and travel freely, and enjoy the same rights as the rest of the global community.

In the context of the “day after,” the UN has several mechanisms for addressing conflict situations. First, is UN Peacekeeping operations. However, these rely both on the willingness of the parties to commit to peace and the willingness of UN member nations to volunteer troops and resources to monitor that peace. Second, is the establishment of a UN Trusteeship under UN General Assembly authority. However, this is more in the context of the administration of former colonies and there has been no practical application since 1996. Additionally, both Israel and the Palestinian people would need to agree, and an Administering Authority not only takes control of governance but also all associated costs. Third, is a UN Transitional Authority/Administration (UNTA).³¹ These have successfully been utilized in the past where conflict has resulted in the destruction of governing capacity. These authorities engage in the day-to-day running of the nation while national capacity is developed. Examples include UNTA in Cambodia (UNTAC),³² UNTA for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja, and Western Sirmium (UNTAES),³³ UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK),³⁴ and UNTA in East Timor (UNTAET).³⁵ These precedents have been at the instigation and under the authority of the UN Security Council. They have generally addressed both short-term relief and stabilization needs as well as longer-term reconciliation, institution building, strengthening civil society, human rights, and support toward self-determination and elections.

Ideally, a UNTA for Gaza (UNTAG) could overcome inter-agency competition and conflict, break down bureaucratic barriers, engage donors, and ensure local engagement. It is a way of strengthening existing institutions through better coordination, not weakening them nor duplicating effort. The current appointment of the UN Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza by the UN Security Council could provide an initial starting point for the establishment of such an UNTAG.³⁶ From previous experience and lessons, international protection through UNTAG would involve the following:³⁷

- ▶ **Ceasefire:** An immediate ceasefire monitored by international forces, including a withdrawal of Israeli troops, a no-fly zone, and the release of all hostages and detainees.
- ▶ **International protection team:** This should include nations which have upheld international law during the conflict and could include South Africa, Qatar, Turkey, Sweden, Spain, India, and Brazil. To maintain regional stability, both Egypt and Jordan must be treated similarly to Israel and Palestine, in that they also need to be protected.
- ▶ **Humanitarian aid:** Immediate and full flow of humanitarian aid, with a priority on shelter and food, through opening border crossings, with independent monitoring to reassure Israeli security concerns. This includes immediately reinstating funding for UN agencies, such as The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which are the only organizations capable of providing large-scale support on the ground.
- ▶ **Law and Order:** This should be achieved through a hybrid model with a local Palestinian police force alongside an international police force. UNTAET in East Timor provides a possible model, where in addition to a peacekeeping military force, UN police from over 40 nations worked with local police to provide immediate stability, community policing, border control, training, and institutional capacity building.³⁸ Alternatively, UNMIK in Kosovo provides a model where the UN Administration worked in parallel with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led Kosovo Force.³⁹
- ▶ **Self-determination:** Implementation of the two-state solution with territorial recognition of a Palestinian State based on the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its Capital. Israel must not attempt to infringe on the territorial integrity of Gaza in the form of extended occupation or the introduction of a buffer (security) zone. Israeli plans to divide Gaza into smaller settlements, as has occurred in the West Bank, must not occur.⁴⁰ Sovereignty includes an immediate cessation of all illegal construction and land-seizing activities in West Bank settlements and criminalizing these activities internationally.
- ▶ **Palestinian Interim Government:** Today, 146 out of 193 UN member states recognize the State of Palestine, including 12 European countries. Recognition alone is not the solution, but a step towards a sustainable solution and can only work in the presence of an effective Palestinian Interim Government/Institutions during the interim phase of international protection. Calls for the revitalization of the existing Palestinian Authority (by addressing corruption) are insufficient. Palestinian institutions need to be unshackled from the Oslo process and reconceptualized as part of a two-state solution. Even Hamas has recently indicated a willingness to disarm if a Palestinian State were established.⁴¹ The establishment of a “unified government” in the short term and the Gaza Reconstruction Council (recommended below) could build on the “national unity agreement” signed by Hamas and Fatah in Beijing on July 23, 2024.⁴²
- ▶ **Donor funding and reparations:** Any assumption that funding for reconstruction will automatically flow is problematic. In the absence of significant progress on a long-term solution, donors and investors are unlikely to engage in any reconstruction if it risks being destroyed yet again. The key financial institutions, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, require Palestine to be a “state” before it can access their resources. Additionally, the ICJ has provided in its advisory opinion that Israel must make reparations, restitution, and compensation for its illegal occupation, and this should continue to be pursued.⁴³ A reconstructed neighbor can only bring peace and stability to Israel as well.
- ▶ **National Reconciliation:** Whether through a unity government or “national consensus” unified government, reconciliation needs to be engaged at multiple levels. Leadership will be required to reach across factions and ensure the engagement of citizens across both the West Bank and Gaza.

- ▶ **Gaza Reconstruction Council:** UNTAG should appoint an independent Reconstruction Council which includes all major Palestinian political groups, including independents, and delegates from major humanitarian institutions. Realistically, this would need to include someone who represents Hamas' interests on the Council. The Council would also guard against over-coordination, which can lead to competitive attempts at influence, rather than the core focus on the welfare of the Palestinian people. For example, reconstruction efforts in Gaza in the 1990s were characterized by 32 formal coordination mechanisms, with political and strategic interests of donors often dominating priorities instead of local perspectives.
- ▶ **Stakeholder processes:** There is a need to involve all stakeholders in reconstruction, especially local groups who might otherwise be marginalized by the international community for political reasons. Past experience has been for parallel systems of formal international reconstruction efforts and informal or “unsanctioned” reconstruction efforts to emerge based on the support of different external groups based on political motives.
- ▶ **Gaza Reconstruction Trust Fund:** UNTAG would also oversee a Trust Fund to collate donor funds and promote accountability and transparency. Funds would be deposited for use as needs arise. Donor pledges made at post-conflict reconstruction conferences are rarely completely fulfilled. The short-term rush of aid tapers off once the international spotlight has moved on to other regions. This means both short-term and long-term commitments need to be followed through.
- ▶ **Local Capacity:** Local groups represent an asset which should be invested in for reconstruction. Although having one of the highest education ratios in the world, much reconstruction in the past has not sufficiently engaged in local Palestinian capacity development. In a circular argument, the lack of sufficient local capacity is used as an excuse to devolve decision-making and delivery to external experts or international organizations, marginalizing local governance and groups.
- ▶ **Justice:** War crimes potentially committed on all sides must be investigated to ensure respect for the international legal system and international order. Additionally, there should be a review of military supplies to the region which have been used to commit war crimes and breach international humanitarian law. International protection means also taking legal action wherever possible against illegal activities, such as Settler invasions, misappropriation of land in the West Bank (now higher than any other period), and killings with impunity or with the support of security forces. It is only by exercising these rights that the rule of law and legal systems can be upheld. Each time a breach occurs without accountability it undermines the credibility of the international system.
- ▶ **Accountability, Transparency and Integrity:** High levels of corruption through bribery or nepotism have undermined confidence in reconstruction efforts in the past. Recruitment processes based on merit are essential to maintain integrity in the process. However, a risk is to rely excessively on external costly international personnel to undertake reviews, auditing procedures, and stricter reporting requirements. This diverts much needed donor funds which could otherwise be utilized to strengthen local governance, increase administrative capacity, and prosecute offenders.
- ▶ **Long-term strategic planning:** Reconstruction in Gaza must connect with the long-term vision of a two-state solution. An integrated approach marrying political, economic, and social aspects should all work toward a vision of an independent Palestine. The international community must also commit to ensuring the swift implementation of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in Palestine.⁴⁴
- ▶ **Holy Sites:** Jordan's custodianship of the Al-Aqsa Mosque must be maintained, and sanctity must be restored to all Christian and Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem.

UNTAG is no “magic bullet” for political resolution but rather a way of breaking the current cycle of conflict followed by reconstruction followed by conflict. Unlike many existing processes, by having the backing of the UN Security Council, UNTAG would be able to make clear and critical decisions relating to reconstruction through the lens of ending the occupation and building sovereignty, while engaging at local levels to “build back better.” The development of strong civic institutions will enable Palestinians to negotiate outstanding political issues directly with Israel, rather than from a position of an occupied territory. UNTAG can also play an important role in acting as a buffer with other nations to allow the UN, donor nations, and non-governmental relief organizations to pursue critical humanitarian assistance rather than being embroiled in political controversy.

Successful reconstruction would break with the past long enough to generate new possibilities for progress and eventual breakthroughs. Such leadership re-imagines a future independent Palestine which has transitioned from despair to hope, violence to safety, marginalization to inclusion, dispossession to sovereignty, disorientation to stability, and humiliation to dignity.

Conclusion: Paving the Way for Reconciliation and Sustainable Peace

The nature of the Gaza conflict is changing and blurring the distinction between “conflict” and “post-conflict” periods, and “planning” and “implementation” phases. Waiting for a ceasefire no longer reflects reality, as the potential “forever war” in Gaza is exacerbated by a paralysis of the international system and its lack of enforcement capacity. Immediate action needs to break free of traditional assumptions about reconstruction and the “day after” as part of a planning process. Instead, leadership is a learning dynamic based on engagement with local and displaced communities to generate new possibilities. The welfare of the Palestinian people is paramount and must be the central focus of this work. It re-imagines reconstruction as supporting the transition by which occupation ends, sovereignty begins, communities are strengthened, and justice and reconciliation are achieved. This social leadership approach also confronts the dynamics which perpetuate the status quo, moving away from excessive reliance on technical solutions and a dependency on authorities, to instead develop the conversations required to heal divisions and factionalism. International protection, potentially through a UN Transitional Authority for Gaza, is essential for creating the environment necessary for this work. In adapting to this unfolding crisis, a “vision” for the day after is a creative approach to local engagement that extends beyond infrastructure to include questions of identity, social cohesion, political reconciliation, sovereignty, justice, economic development, and cultural renaissance.

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