



IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

From Gaza to Iran: Where Is the Dignified Way Out of War?

Masood Abdali¹

The three-year-long war in Gaza and the ongoing tensions with Iran are both raising the same fundamental question: at what point does war ultimately yield to politics? In Gaza, Hamas has expressed willingness to disarm after relinquishing administrative control and following the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces, while in the case of Iran, some senior officials in the US military leadership appear to have concluded that achieving the desired political objectives through air power alone will be difficult. Thus, on both fronts, the path from the battlefield to the negotiating table has assumed growing importance.

Hamas's Conditional Offer

According to President Trump, Hamas has agreed to disarm in Gaza. A spokesperson for the resistance movement also confirmed the development, making clear that this willingness is conditional upon the withdrawal of Israeli forces. Hamas had earlier indicated that it was prepared to hand over the day-to-day administration of Gaza to an agreed-upon Palestinian administration.

This development has emerged in the context of the US-backed Board of Peace plan. The plan proposes turning Gaza into a demilitarized territory, removing Hamas and other armed groups from administrative affairs, establishing an interim Palestinian administration, and carrying out a phased withdrawal of Israeli forces. According to the

plan, Israeli forces are to completely withdraw from Gaza as the stages of demilitarization and agreed security conditions are fulfilled.

From Ceasefire to the Board of Peace

Various regional and international powers, including Qatar, Egypt, and the United States, have continued efforts toward a ceasefire, the exchange of prisoners and hostages, and a political solution. Subsequently, the US-backed Board of Peace plan attempted to bring these efforts together within a broader framework, incorporating a ceasefire, humanitarian assistance, and an interim Palestinian administration, the demilitarization of Hamas, an international stabilization force, and the phased withdrawal of Israeli forces as components of a single process.

If Hamas's willingness to disarm after relinquishing administrative control of Gaza is understood in its apparent sense, it represents less a change in Hamas strategy than an attempt to bring its struggle into alignment with realities on the ground. It would not be accurate to characterize this as defeat or surrender. Hamas maintains that if Israeli forces withdraw from Gaza, there will no longer be a need to retain weapons, and the organization can focus its energies on the political process and public service. Whether this position proves viable or not will be determined by the future; nevertheless, it is certainly an important development for the negotiating process.

¹ Senior IPS Research Associate.

At this stage, the fundamental question is whether the ball is now truly in Israel's court. Israel's past record in this regard is extremely disappointing. Israel has not established a precedent of fully and unconditionally withdrawing from territories it has occupied following wars. This historical background reinforces the doubts of Palestinian leaders and the Arab world. Events that have occurred during the ceasefire are also noteworthy in this context. Hamas handed over the remaining hostages and the remains of the deceased to Israel in a timely manner under the agreement, whereas Israel did not fully implement its commitments to halt military advances and withdraw, despite these being demands made of by Tel Aviv under the peace agreement.

The key question now is: if even the offer to end armed resistance, relinquish administrative control of Gaza, and accept international oversight is not sufficient, then what exactly are Israel's conditions for peace?

This Is Where Netanyahu's Political Dilemma Begins

Accepting the US-backed plan would ultimately mean the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza and handing over the political administration of Gaza to Palestinians and international oversight. On the other hand, members of the Israeli government's far-right coalition strongly oppose this course calling Hamas's move as a "Strategic Ambush," to gain time and prevent Israel from resuming military operations. They support the resumption of military operations in Gaza and a permanent Israeli presence there. This Israeli concern may be understandable in its own right, but it also has another dimension. If Hamas's offer constitutes a "strategic ambush" for Israel, the best way for Israel to test it is not to continue the war but to implement verifiable terms of an agreement and accept international monitoring. If one party promises to disarm, that commitment can be monitored; if there is a commitment regarding the withdrawal of Israeli forces, its stages can be determined. The real test is whether both sides are willing to assess

each other's commitments through a verifiable system rather than rejecting them on the basis of suspicion.

The Real Question Facing Netanyahu

For Netanyahu, the difficulty lies not only in negotiating with Hamas but also in satisfying his own political allies. If he accepts the US-backed plan, he will face pressure from his far-right coalition partners; if he rejects the plan, the political and diplomatic cost of disagreement with Washington and continuing the war could increase.

Therefore, the question is not whether Hamas has laid a "trap" for Israel. The real question is whether Netanyahu is prepared to pay the political price for peace—the price that must be paid to end the war rather than continue it.

Iran: The Path to War Is Also Narrowing for Washington

Turning from Gaza toward Iran, the situation appears different but fundamentally similar.

According to CNN, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dan Caine expressed concern in a recent private conversation that the United States needs an "Off-ramp" to exit a war with Iran. In his view, the military options under consideration could prove counterproductive, while achieving the administration's desired objectives through air strikes alone would be difficult.

Here, an "Off-ramp" means a "dignified exit from war"—a pathway through which the United States can avoid further military confrontation while protecting its fundamental interests as much as possible and transform the war into a diplomatic outcome rather than a complete defeat or retreat.

The concern is not limited to General Caine. Vice President JD Vance, CIA Director John Ratcliffe, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, among other senior administration officials, are also considering possibilities for bringing the war to an acceptable conclusion.

Where Does the Reach of Bombing End?

The concern of the US military leadership is understandable. Air power can inflict severe

damage on an adversary's infrastructure, missile installations, and other military targets, but politically subduing a large and geographically complex country like Iran through bombing alone is a much more difficult task.

To completely eliminate military capabilities, the number of targets would continue to increase, attacks would become prolonged, and the risk of Iranian retaliation would also grow. A limited air campaign could thus gradually turn into a prolonged war.

The question of a ground operation would then arise, which could be even more dangerous. Deploying US ground forces in Iran would require large numbers of troops, extensive logistics, air defenses, and a long-term military presence. At the same time, the possibility of American military casualties and Iranian retaliatory attacks in the Gulf, and other locations across the region would increase manifold.

Washington therefore faces a difficult choice as well: achieving the desired results through air strikes is difficult, while the implications of a ground war are far more serious.

The Diplomatic Window Is Still Open

If the Strait of Hormuz is reopened, attacks cease, and negotiations move forward on disputed issues, including Iran's nuclear program, this could provide the United States with the same dignified exit that the US military leadership has been discussing. In such a scenario, Washington could argue that military pressure paved the way for negotiations and that diplomacy is now achieving the desired results. In this way, ending the war could be presented not as an admission of defeat but as the

transformation of military pressure into a diplomatic success.

Ending a War Is More Difficult Than Winning One

The two fronts—Gaza and Iran—point toward a common reality: starting a war is relatively easy, but ending it in accordance with one's interests is far more difficult.

In Gaza, Hamas's conditional offer to disarm has placed a political question before Israel, while in Iran, concerns within the US military leadership are forcing Washington to consider that achieving the desired political results through military force alone may not be possible.

Therefore, in the coming days, the real struggle may take place at the negotiating table rather than on the battlefield. The question for Gaza is whether Israel will move toward a military withdrawal and a political solution, while in the case of Iran, the question is whether the United States can transform military pressure into an acceptable diplomatic agreement.

After the Gun, the Table

The rubble of Gaza and the war-torn landscape of Iran offer the same lesson: every war ultimately reaches the negotiating table, but the question is how many lives and how much wealth will be lost before it gets there.

The true victor of a war is not the one who causes the greatest destruction; the real success lies in finding a path to peace after the destruction. Perhaps, for both Gaza and Iran, the next chapter of history should now be written not on the battlefield but at the negotiating table.

