

Israel-Hamas war

Israel tests Hamas-free 'bubbles' plan for post-war Gaza

Pilot in northern neighbourhoods described by insiders as a 'fantasy' scheme that will struggle to take hold

Neri Zilber in Tel Aviv 9 HOURS AGO

Israel is preparing to test an experimental model for running postwar Gaza, by creating a series of “bubbles” that are designed to be Hamas-free but have been met with incredulity by many people briefed on the plans.

The pilot scheme for the “humanitarian enclaves” — a template for what Israel imagines would follow the war — will soon be launched in the northern Gaza neighbourhoods of Atatra, Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahia, according to six people with knowledge of the plan.

But even with the Israeli military on the cusp of starting the pilots, there is widespread scepticism over their viability given the violent opposition of Hamas, infighting in Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government over the details and tepid backing from Arab states. One person with knowledge of the plan called it a “fantasy” project.

Under the scheme, the Israeli military would funnel aid from the nearby Western Erez crossing to vetted local Palestinians, who would distribute the aid and gradually expand their responsibilities to take over civilian governance in the area. Israeli forces, at least for an initial phase, would ensure security.

If successful, Israel would then expand the “bubbles” southward to other parts of Gaza, as a means to replace Hamas rule after nearly two decades of the militant group governing the strip. One person familiar with Israeli thinking said the plan was also seen as a way to apply pressure on Hamas in sputtering talks over a ceasefire-for-hostage deal.

This latest Israeli initiative comes after months of international pressure on the Netanyahu government to formulate a credible alternative regime for postwar Gaza. But two other people briefed on the plan said it was merely another version of prior Israeli attempts, which had been de facto scuppered by Hamas.

“We already tried this in three different parts of central and north Gaza, including with local clans. They were all either beaten up or killed by Hamas,” said one former senior Israeli official familiar with postwar planning.

Deadly clashes erupted last week between a prominent clan in central Gaza and Hamas security personnel after the militant group executed the head of the Abu Amra family over alleged “receptivity” to Israeli overtures, according to one security source on Gaza.

Hamas said in a statement last Tuesday that it would not allow any actor to “interfere” with the future of the Gaza Strip and that it would “sever any hand of the [Israeli] occupation trying to tamper with the destiny and future of our people”.

A second person with knowledge of postwar Gaza plans added that Israeli attempts to identify local Palestinians who could run Gaza in Hamas’s stead have been ongoing since November, without any significant success.

“This [plan] is just the latest iteration. The idea in Israeli minds is that someone — the Arab states, the international community — will pay for it, and locals in Gaza will run it. But no one is biting,” the person added.



More than 80 per cent of the buildings in Khan Younis, in the south of the strip, are estimated to be destroyed © Eyad Baba/AFP/Getty Images

A key obstacle is Netanyahu's consistent rejection of any role in Gaza for the moderate Palestinian Authority, which exerts limited self-rule in parts of the occupied West Bank and was violently ejected from Gaza by Hamas in 2007. Netanyahu has also flatly rebuffed any future pathway to Palestinian statehood.

The long-serving Israeli premier reiterated this position in recent weeks, saying: "I'm not ready to establish a Palestinian state there [in Gaza]. I'm not ready to hand it over to the PA."

Nevertheless, Netanyahu and his senior aides continue to insist that Arab governments will play a major role in any postwar arrangement, whether via the provision of diplomatic support, financing or even peacekeepers.

Tzachi Hanegbi, Israel's national security adviser, has called for "top down leadership" from a "cluster of moderate Arab countries, along with the US, the EU and the UN". In combination with a "local Palestinian leadership", they would lead the "move to create an alternative to Hamas", he told a security conference last week.

Yet Arab officials have rejected playing any such role without the PA and material progress towards a Palestinian state, according to five people familiar with discussions.

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“Arab states will not support reconstruction in Gaza or postwar plans unless Israel takes concrete steps towards the establishment of a Palestinian state,” said one Arab diplomat.



Trucks loaded with humanitarian aid arrive at the US-built floating pier Trident before reaching the beach on the coast of the Gaza Strip © Leo Correa/AP

The “humanitarian bubbles” were only one tactical part of a much broader three-tier postwar plan championed by the Israeli security establishment and defence minister Yoav Gallant, according to the former senior official.

Under the full scheme, a wide international coalition including moderate Arab states would provide the overall diplomatic and financial “envelope” for postwar Gaza.

PA officials and other local leaders inside Gaza would manage the new regime — an intermediate tier of governance that many foreign diplomats believe should be a technocratic government.

On the ground, “humanitarian bubbles” would then in effect be run by representatives from the international and Arab coalition, local PA officials, and private contractors and business people.

Several people familiar with the postwar Gaza discussions said there were also plans to train a local Palestinian force from inside Gaza to take over security in the “humanitarian bubbles”.

Such a force would consist of former PA security personnel who would travel to either

Jordan or the West Bank for training under the auspices of US Lt. Gen. Michael Fenzel, the Jerusalem-based security co-ordinator between Israel and the PA.

Majed Faraj, the PA's influential intelligence chief, has already begun vetting candidates from inside Gaza, with several thousand men identified as potential recruits, according to two people familiar with the matter.

Yet the plan has met with resistance from the upper levels of the Netanyahu government, who are "not willing to even utter the words Palestinian Authority" and were now only discussing the initial "bubbles" pilot, said the former senior Israeli official.

"If you try to experiment just on the lower level it won't work. Nobody will put money into this without a long-term comprehensive plan. There are no buyers," the person added.

Additional reporting by Mai Khaled in Cairo and Andrew England in London

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