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Will Trump Greenlight Netanyahu's Endgame in Gaza?



Photograph Source: The White House – Public Domain

It's hard to recall, given the unfathomable desperation now stalking Gaza, but for a fleeting moment earlier this year there was joy in the air among hundreds of thousands of Palestinians returning to the rubble of their homes in north Gaza. 'It is a festive day for us, as if we have been resurrected and now are entering paradise,' a young displaced man told Al-Jazeera in late January. 'him. Most had been displaced repeatedly, pushed from one 'safe zone' to another, meagre belongings in tow; many separated from family and loved ones by the relentless bombing; the less fortunate had lost all or most of their families, or returned to the north orphaned, or having had limbs amputated. Hunger and malnutrition was rife.

The relief among Palestinians and the hope around the globe that the end of slaughter might be in sight detonated a crisis in the Israeli government. Ministers from the Zionist settler right resigned from Netanyahu's cabinet, livid that their genocide was being cut short. Their outrage was intensified by clear indications—in the captive release ceremonies broadcast

worldwide—that despite Israel’s relentless bombardment the armed Palestinian resistance remained unvanquished and unbowed.

Netanyahu had come around to ceasefire only reluctantly, and determined early on to sabotage any attempts to extend the pause. Despite Hamas’s offer to exceed what was required of them under terms of the initial exchange, the Israelis refused to engage in negotiations on phase two, which required them ‘to withdraw fully from Gaza and agree to permanently end the war’. It became increasingly clear that although they’d agreed a ceasefire deal under pressure, Netanyahu had never intended to comply.

There were ominous signs confirming this in Israeli provocations around fulfilling their obligations for releasing Palestinian detainees; more significantly, their pullback in Gaza coincided with dramatic intensification of IOF operations in the West Bank. As he has throughout negotiations, Netanyahu introduced new, humiliating conditions that he knew Hamas could not accept. The return to war was sealed when US mediator Steven Witkoff accepted Israel’s ultimatums as the basis for so-called ‘bridging proposals’—in effect, annulling the agreement that he himself had secured just weeks earlier.

The descent back into a war of extermination has been relentless ever since. Lavishly re-supplied by the Trump administration (on an expedited basis) two weeks earlier and supported by UK air power, Israel commenced an intensified bombing campaign in mid-March, killing more than 460 Gazans—overwhelmingly civilians—in the first 24 hours. The bombing—most of it carried out with 2000-pound US-supplied MK-84s—has been continuous, frequently targeting the tents of displaced civilians.

Everywhere the intensified bombing campaign is accompanied by mass starvation: since 2 March, ‘Israel has completely shut all crossings into the enclave, cutting off food, humanitarian aid, and commercial supplies’, in what the UN describes as a ‘deliberate decision to block all aid’ as a form of ‘collective punishment’ aimed at ‘pressuris[ing] Hamas.’ *Al-Jazeera* reports that at least 57 Palestinians have starved to death under the current blockade, and *Euro-Med Monitor* warns that ‘escalating famine in Gaza [has] reached catastrophic proportions’. The first two weeks of May saw a ‘sharp rise in adult death rates... alongside alarming levels of child mortality.’

Implementing ‘Trump’s Plan’?

It is in the context of this open withdrawal from any semblance of ceasefire negotiations that the ominous developments of the past week must be considered. The unanimous decision by Netanyahu’s cabinet to implement a new plan of ‘conquest’ to ‘utterly destruct and

depopulate’ Gaza could not have been taken without a sense that Washington has its back: indeed the Israeli right repeatedly insist they are only carrying out ‘Trump’s plan’.

Once Trump came out (in his farcical ‘Riviera’ scheme) for the forced displacement of Palestinians, *Ha’aretz* military analyst Amos Harel observes, ‘you could see how not only the [extremist right], but also Likud ministers and so on, have an excuse’. ‘It’s not us. It’s [the] free world’s leader saying that [so] we have to play along.’ There is a charade being played out here, of course: the Zionist right is keen to cover the impending horror with Washington’s authority, and their incessant flattery is meant to draw Trump into a *fait accompli*, with potential consequences that, at best, he only dimly grasps.

The deliberate blockading of all food and medical supplies for Gaza and the resumption of war has gone almost completely without comment in state and corporate-owned media in the west: instead they direct their venom at those (like *Kneecap* or *Kehlani*) who speak out against genocide. In empowering ICE to round up Palestinian solidarity activists, the Trump administration has set a template for a new round of unprecedented repression: in Germany, especially, but also across Ireland and the UK, Israel’s open abandonment of the ceasefire has been accompanied by the most severe assault on democratic rights in more than a half century.

Given the scale of barbarism unleashed by the Israeli military over the past year and a half (70,000 tons of explosives—‘the equivalent of six Hiroshimas’—bringing destruction ‘unparalleled in the post Second World War World era’), it is difficult to imagine what an ‘intensification’ of operations might look like. More significantly, while renewed slaughter might bring some perverse satisfaction to elements calling for a ‘Shoah in Gaza’, new operations are unlikely to deliver the victory that has so far eluded Netanyahu. For all its enthusiasm for inflicting carnage, and despite massive advantages in numbers and technology, Israel has failed to achieve either of its two key objectives—the return of Israeli captives and the elimination of Hamas. Nothing in the new plan is likely to alter assessments made more than a year ago that despite ‘significant’ tactical successes ‘Israel has already lost the war’ in strategic terms.

Given its colossal military advantages, Israel’s inability to secure a victory is staggering. Buried in the IOF’s declaration of its intent to carry out ‘intensified activity in the Hamas tunnel network’ was the astonishing admission that eighteen months into the war ‘only a quarter’ of them have been ‘fully neutralized’. A former Israeli general conceded that the Palestinian resistance has shown a capacity to retake towns within ‘15 minutes’ of Israeli withdrawals. One leading Israeli newspaper, lauding IOF plans to ‘replicate’ its [partial]

success in the south, boasted that the military would *now* take the war to Hamas—'this time for real'. It's the farcical equivalent of the unbridled US war machine lamenting, after its defeat in Vietnam, that it had fought the war 'with one hand tied behind its back'. It would be laughable except for the gruesome toll such self-delusion will inflict on Palestinians.

Netanyahu's adoption of the new military plans are widely seen in Israeli society as definitive confirmation that the return of Israelis hostages was never a priority, and it is time this canard was driven out of mainstream commentary. Leading IOF commanders have admitted that an intensified military offensive will almost certainly bring the death of any Israelis held in Gaza. 'In international media,' Amir Tibon notes in Ha'aretz, 'government spokespersons frequently cite the hostages as the primary reason for the ongoing war', but domestically, they '[promote] a very different discourse...that treats the hostages as a distraction and a burden'.

By now it is well-established that Hamas was prepared to return all captives more than a year ago, but deals were repeatedly blocked by Netanyahu's negotiators. Several weeks ago the far right Minister for Finance Bezalel Smotrich admitted publicly that their return was 'not the most important goal', and Netanyahu's supporters are not only 'directly involved' in a 'smearing campaign' against relatives of hostages deemed 'traitors', but regularly post 'debasing and misogynistic tweets' against female former hostages. From the standpoint of the Israeli regime this was *never* a war to 'free hostages', but from the outset an opportunist war of extermination against Palestinians.

Zionism, MAGA and US Imperialism

The White House has been keen to project an aura of invincibility around an American military machineretooled around the (apparently novel) objectives of 'lethality' and 'warfighting'. The projection of military swagger sits uneasily, however, alongside a deep aversion to being drawn into 'peripheral' actions that can't deliver quick, tangible rewards. While its always challenging to decipher what's going on in Trump's erratic mind, or to locate any coherence or consistency in MAGA foreign policy, its broad parameters are clear enough. Having built his base partly out of demoralisation over long-drawn out US debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan, Trump aims to wield US military power as a threat to force concessions around the globe, but to deploy it sparingly and concentrate resources for looming confrontation with China.

Until now Trump's lavish support for Israel's war of extermination seems to directly contradict this doctrine: Washington has gifted some £12b in munitions since the inauguration. At the most basic level this is because MAGA is no different in any

fundamental way from the Democrats in its embrace of the Israeli exception, but it's significant also that prominent Trump officials are committed Christian Zionists—Stefanik, Hegseth, Huckabee—with strong ties to settler far right. Netanyahu's influence among Republicans is obvious, and his government works in close coordination with a Zionist lobby that wields enormous influence. The thinktanks shaping Trump policy for the Middle East are stacked with deranged veterans of the US/Israeli military and intelligence establishments. Despite the strength of Zionist influence in the MAGA ranks there are signs of increasing tensions, and this has injected a sense of panic for Netanyahu and his circle. These burst into the open in early May with Trump's removal of National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, for having engaged in 'intense coordination' with Netanyahu over the possibility of military strikes on Iran, but Waltz's removal reflected deeper tensions over Trump's earlier veto of joint US-Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. On the 6th, with Ben Gurion Airport still reeling after being hit with ballistic missiles, Trump announced a ceasefire agreement with the Houthis. Israeli analysts called it a 'reminder that the administration is working to realize its interests even if these do not coincide with the interests of the Israeli government.'

The growing tensions underline an emerging dilemma facing US imperialism in the Middle East— one that this administration is perhaps more exposed to than its predecessor. The recent announcement that armed US mercenary contractors will play a prominent role in overseeing 'security' and the distribution of food and other aid to any Palestinians who survive the new Israeli operations raises alarm bells that the US will be drawn into managing occupation. These fears are reinforced by reports that Washington will lead 'a temporary post-war administration' in Gaza modelled on the Coalition Provisional Authority the US established in 2003 in Iraq. Such a scenario doesn't play well among the 'neo-con bashers' at the top of MAGA, who will wince at being 'dragged into an adventure drawn up directly from the Iraq War textbook.'

The other, more serious problem for Trump is that he is about to embark on a major tour of the Middle East 'shackled with Gaza,' as one former US diplomat put it. 'He cannot wish it away,' Trump is going in search of major financial deals to offset his plummeting domestic standing—the Saudis alone are reportedly poised to invest a trillion dollars in the US economy—but all signs are he is 'going to be hammered...for what is not happening' on Gaza, and pressured to force Netanyahu to stand down from launching an intensified new offensive. As an aside, the Gulf rulers are not keen on opening up a new war with Iran that will inevitably destabilise the entire region. Finally, the last few months have shown the limits of Trump's swagger: he's been singularly unsuccessful in pressing Egypt or Jordan to

sign on to forced displacement: it's likely that both regimes worry that complicity might be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

All of this means that there are no easy options for US imperialism in the region. The hard Zionists who have wielded such immense influence in successive administrations want to give Netanyahu what he wants to carry out his endgame in Gaza and the West Bank, and to extend the war to Iran and perhaps elsewhere. But this comes up increasingly against competing priorities for American capitalism in the region: as one astute analyst put it, its complicity in the destruction of Gaza 'stands in the way of every policy objective the Trump administration claims to have in the Middle East.'

While it is premature to suggest, as some have done, that we are on the cusp of a historic rupture between the US and Israel, there is no doubt that the problems that their alliance throws up are becoming more and more difficult to contain. Again, while it's difficult to gauge whether Trump comprehends any of this, there is little doubt that he 'holds the power to green-light or halt' Netanyahu's plans, and the Israelis seem anxious for the first time in a long time.

Palestine Liberation and the Global Order

As the US-based *Council on American-Islamic Relations* (CAIR) has observed, the 'Israeli government is screaming as loudly as it can to anyone who will listen that it plans to expel the Palestinian people from Gaza and exterminate or starve any Palestinians who remain'. The world's ongoing failure to halt such an openly declared genocide—the great crime of our age—constitutes one of the most shameful chapters in modern history.

On the other hand, the resilience of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank in the face of such horror has inspired an unprecedented global mass movement, and exposed for an entire generation the sham of liberal democracy and the moral desolation and hypocrisy of the 'rules-based international order'. While the long-term fallout from these revelations is impossible to predict, it is clear even now that our world will emerge at the other end of this slaughter fundamentally changed. Almost the entire global establishment is implicated in the great crime of Gaza: we must ensure that in time none of them escapes having to answer for their complicity.

One glaring paradox in all of this is that the actions of a state ostensibly founded as a refuge for victims of the Holocaust have played a critical role in bolstering authoritarianism and giving succour to the gathering forces of an emerging fascist right in our own time. Most remarkable, however, is the way in which Palestine has assumed its role as a beacon of human liberation in every corner of this tired planet. Up against the best-resourced and most

powerful armies in the history of the world, the people of Gaza and the West Bank may yet humble the mighty and give aching humanity the new start we so desperately need.

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