

Israel : With or without Sinwar, Netanyahu has no interest in ending the war

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The Hamas leader's death could make the return of Palestinian governance in Gaza more likely. For Israel's government, that scenario must be thwarted.

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a state ceremony marking the anniversary of the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on October 7, October 27, 2024. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

It took the Israeli army more than a year to find and kill Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar in Gaza — and it ultimately did so by chance, only discovering his identity after killing him. The Israeli government had repeatedly claimed Sinwar was hiding in an underground bunker, surrounded by human shields in the form of Israeli hostages. But rather than tracking him down there, soldiers encountered him above ground in a building in Rafah, when he opened fire at them.

Israel's military, politicians, and media roundly celebrated killing the man responsible for orchestrating the October 7 massacres. Photos of Sinwar's mutilated and dust-covered body, lying in a pit of rubble, and videos of his last moments inside the building where he was killed were widely circulated as a kind of "victory image." "The man who committed the most terrible massacre in the history of our people since the Holocaust was eliminated today," Netanyahu [declared](#), after the army confirmed that the body belonged to Sinwar. "Hamas will no longer rule Gaza. This is the beginning of the day after Hamas."

Policymakers and analysts around the world quickly began interpreting Sinwar's killing as the beginning of the end of the war. U.S. President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, and many other world leaders [stressed](#) that his death opened the door to a deal to free the hostages and reach a ceasefire. Even family members of hostages argued that there was no real excuse to continue the hostilities. "Sinwar has been eliminated," Einav Zangauker, the mother of a hostage still being held in Gaza, [said](#) at a rally in Tel Aviv. "What else is there to fight [there]?"

But Israel is far from ending the war. Following Sinwar's assassination, Netanyahu clarified that "the mission before us is not yet complete." And while signaling toward a "day after Hamas," it was no coincidence that he didn't bother elaborating on who will rule Gaza when that day comes.

Besides Hamas, there is only one body that may be willing and able to take responsibility for governing and rebuilding Gaza after the war : the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority (PA) or some derivative of it. In July, Hamas and Fatah [signed a unity agreement](#) to ensure Palestinian control over Gaza after the war. Meanwhile, Arab states willing to take part in the post-war effort to secure and reconstruct the Strip [say](#) they will only enter the enclave if the PA invites them.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken meets with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah, January 31, 2023. (State Department photo by Ron Przysucha/ Public Domain)

This is exactly the outcome Netanyahu seeks to avoid. Back in November of last year, [I argued](#) that the prime minister was aiming to prolong the war in order to save his life's mission of preventing Palestinian statehood. If the PA were to take over the governance of Gaza, uniting the occupied territories under its sole rule, Israel would come under immense international pressure to negotiate with it to that end.

By December, Netanyahu had effectively made averting this possibility a third, non-official war goal, on top of destroying Hamas and bringing home the hostages. "We will not bring into Gaza those who educate terrorism, support terrorism, [and] finance terrorism," he [said](#). "Gaza will neither be 'Hamastan' nor 'Fatahstan.'"

Nearly a year later, that goal hasn't changed. In this regard, Sinwar's assassination actually makes things harder for Netanyahu. After all, so long as the Hamas leader was alive, there was a consensus among the Israeli public — as well as in the American administration — that the Israeli army should keep fighting in order to prevent a scenario in which a Sinwar-led Hamas would continue to control Gaza after the war.

Now that this possibility no longer exists, restoring PA rule to the Strip appears increasingly inevitable, certainly to world leaders. And that, for Netanyahu, poses a major problem.

Sanctifying a new status quo

Right now, Israel faces three options : agree to a ceasefire deal to end the war and return the hostages in exchange for prisoners ; continue fighting in Gaza and Lebanon in the hope that Hamas and Hezbollah will be so severely weakened that they will no longer pose a threat to Israel ; or impose full Israeli rule over Gaza, while cleansing it of its Palestinian population and reestablishing Jewish settlements, as many on the right are [clamoring for](#).



Right-wing activists at a settlement event near Gaza, October 21, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

Even after Sinwar's killing, the chances that Netanyahu will choose the first option appear slim. There are certainly compelling reasons for him to accept a deal : it would allow him to contest the next election as the leader who both eliminated the two "arch-terrorists" Sinwar and [Hassan Nasrallah](#), and returned the hostages (at least those who are [still alive](#)). But his coalition partners — Itamar Ben Gvir, Bezalel Smotrich, and perhaps also Gideon Sa'ar — will never allow him to.

Besides, as mentioned, such a move risks jeopardizing his legacy by paving the way toward a Palestinian state. And there is simply not enough pressure, either from Washington or the Israeli public, to force his hand.

The second option, continuing the war indefinitely, seems to be the natural choice for a man who has spent the past 15 years sanctifying the status quo. The current situation is of course much less

bearable for many Israelis than what existed here before October 7 — with [more than 60 soldiers killed](#) since the start of the month, thousands of people still displaced from the north and the south, communities across the country being forced into their rocket shelters every day, and a deteriorating economy. For Netanyahu, though, this new status quo is still preferable to a political settlement with the Palestinians.

But there is also the third option : the full or partial expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza and reestablishment of Jewish settlements. Netanyahu may have [stated](#) at the UN General Assembly that Israel “does not want to settle Gaza,” and he is well aware that such a move [remains unpopular](#) among the Israeli public, even as it [grows increasingly mainstream](#) at the political level. Yet his total indifference to Palestinian lives and his obsession with denying the Palestinians national self-determination, combined with pressure from his coalition partners to “clean” the northern Gaza Strip and rebuild Jewish settlements there, may push Netanyahu to adopt this option. And based on what is currently happening in northern Gaza, he might already have done so.

After Sinwar’s death, ‘there is an opportunity’

Last month, [I imagined](#) what it might look like if the Israeli army implemented the so-called Generals’ Plan. That plan, spearheaded by Maj. Gen. (res.) Giora Eiland, proposed giving residents of northern Gaza a week to evacuate south of the Netzarim Corridor that bisects the Strip, before imposing a total siege on the area to prevent any food, water, electricity, or medicine from entering.

Palestinians fleeing Beit Lahia via Salah al-Din Street to Gaza City, October 22, 2024. (Omar Elqataa)

I wondered what would happen if the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians living in the north of the Strip would refuse to leave. Would the army forcibly expel them, or subject them to “a process of starvation or extermination,” as one of the plan’s proponents [suggested](#) ?

This dystopian scenario is now materializing, at least in part. According to local residents and aid agencies, since the Israeli military operation [began in early October](#), it has been impossible to bring food or medicine into the besieged areas north of Gaza City. As suspected, most residents refused to leave their homes or shelters, and so the Israeli army intensified its bombardment, killing [more than 1,000 people](#) in the north of the Strip over the past three weeks. First responders have been forced to [suspend all activity](#) in the besieged areas due to incessant targeting.

The army has bombed shelters, [raided hospitals](#), and rounded up thousands of residents — some of whom were then [forcibly marched southward at gunpoint](#), while others were stripped, bound, and driven away to detention camps where [torture and abuse are rife](#). And after emptying shelters of their displaced occupants, soldiers set the buildings on fire to prevent residents from returning.

The IDF Spokesperson has denied that the army is implementing the Generals’ Plan, and claims that “the evacuation of the population was carried out temporarily and subject to military necessity only.” Yet Eran Etzion, former deputy head of Israel’s National Security Council, has [alleged](#) that Netanyahu’s government secretly approved the General’s Plan, while Netanyahu [reportedly](#) refused U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s request that he state publicly that it is not being implemented. It is no wonder that Western governments are [increasingly concerned](#) that Israel is seeking to push all Palestinians out of northern Gaza.

The killing of Sinwar didn’t halt this operation ; if anything, it accelerated it, since the [army claims](#) that news of the Hamas leader’s death has broken residents’ willpower to remain in the besieged areas. “This is an opportunity for you, the people of Gaza, to finally be rid of [Sinwar’s] tyranny,”

Netanyahu said after the killing.

But for the Israeli government and its supporters, it seems Sinwar's death is an opportunity to be rid of the Palestinians and their presence in Gaza. As Yehuda Yifrah, head of the right-wing Israeli paper Makor Rishon's legal desk recently [put it](#) : "Gaza cannot be a suitable place for Palestinians to live ... The only option for a decent life for Gazans is not inside the Gaza Strip but outside it, in the big wide world that craves working hands."

It is no coincidence that, as Channel 12 [recently revealed](#), the fingerprints of pro-settlement organizations were all over the drafting of the Generals' Plan, seeing it as a stepping stone toward annexation. In the meantime, the army is cooperating with the campaign, and the Israeli public is willingly endorsing it.

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P.-S.

- +972 Magazine. October 30, 2024 :
<https://www.972mag.com/northern-gaza-liquidation-scenario-eiland-rabi/>

A version of this article was first published in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).

- Meron Rapoport's article on +972 Magazine :
<https://www.972mag.com/writer/meron-rapoport/>
- Meron Rapoport is an editor at Local Call.

Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war. The world is reeling from Israel's unprecedented onslaught on Gaza, inflicting mass devastation and death upon besieged Palestinians, as well as the atrocious attack and kidnappings by Hamas in Israel on October 7. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing this violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to intensify their attacks on Palestinians. The most far-right government in Israel's history is ramping up its policing of dissent, using the cover of war to silence Palestinian citizens and left-wing Jews who object to its policies.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 14 years covering : Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, entrenched occupation and apartheid, and a normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#) ? +972 Magazine is a leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists, activists, and thinkers can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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