

What Gantz's Exit Reveals About Israel's Failed Gaza Strategy

October 7 collapsed Israel's decades-old 'separation policy' toward Gaza. Gantz and Gallant know it; Netanyahu and the far right still won't admit it.

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*On the face of it, it's hard to make sense of the rift within Israel's government over the "day after" in Gaza, which led **Benny Gantz** to quit the coalition on Sunday. In a press conference announcing his decision, Gantz accused **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** of "preventing ... real victory" by failing to present a viable plan for the Strip's post-war governance.*

Gantz, who joined the government and war cabinet after October 7 as a minister without portfolio, has been [urging](#) Netanyahu for months to lay out his "day after" plan. The prime minister, who has a personal and political interest in [prolonging the war](#), has so far refused to produce one; instead, he has only repeatedly [insisted](#) that he rejects both the continued existence of a "Hamastan" and its replacement with a "Fatahstan" run by the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Yet Gantz doesn't have a viable plan either. His [proposal](#) — replacing Hamas with an "international civilian governance mechanism" that includes some Palestinian elements, while maintaining overall Israeli security control — is so far-fetched that its practical significance is to [continue the war indefinitely](#). In other words, exactly what Netanyahu and his far-right allies want.

The same can be said of **Defense Minister Yoav Gallant**, who was Gantz's closest ally in the war cabinet. Gallant reportedly walked out of a security cabinet meeting last month when other ministers [castigated him](#) for demanding that Netanyahu rule out prolonged

Israeli civilian or military control over Gaza. But the defense minister's alternative proposal is essentially the same as Gantz's: to establish a government run by non-Hamas "Palestinian entities" with international backing — which no Palestinian, Arab, or international actors will accept.

It's true that Gantz and Gallant have also demanded that Netanyahu prioritize a deal with Hamas to bring back the hostages, while the prime minister is dragging his feet. But this apparent disagreement also collapses under scrutiny: any deal would entail a significant, if not complete, Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and a months-long, if not permanent, ceasefire. Such a scenario would result in one of two possibilities: a return to Hamas rule, or the reimposition of the PA — both of which are unacceptable to Gantz and Gallant on the one hand, and Netanyahu and his far-right allies on the other.

So why does the Israeli right see the fundamentally incoherent proposals of Gantz and Gallant as an existential threat? The answer goes far deeper than disagreements over the question of Gaza's "day-after." What Gantz and Gallant are implicitly acknowledging, and Netanyahu and his allies refuse to admit, is that Israel's decades-old "separation policy" has collapsed in the wake of the October 7 attacks. No longer able to maintain the illusion that the Gaza Strip has been severed from the West Bank and thus from any future Palestinian political settlement, Israel's leaders are in a bind.

From Separation to Annexation

Israel's separation policy can be [traced back to the early '90s](#), when, against the backdrop of the First Intifada and the Gulf War, the government began imposing a permit regime on Palestinians that limited travel between the West Bank and Gaza. Such restrictions intensified during the Second Intifada and culminated in the aftermath of Israel's "disengagement" from Gaza in 2005 and Hamas's subsequent rise to power.

Most Israelis thought that Israel had left Gaza and therefore no longer bore any responsibility for what happened in the Strip. The international community largely rejected this stance and continued to view Israel as an occupying power in Gaza, but the Israeli government consistently shirked its responsibility for the enclave's residents. At most, the government was willing to grant Palestinians travel permits to enter the West Bank or Israel on special humanitarian grounds.

When Netanyahu returned to the premiership in 2009, he worked to entrench the separation policy. He expanded the rift between Gaza and the West Bank by channeling funds to the Hamas government in the Strip, based on the belief that dividing the Palestinians geographically and politically would limit the possibility of an independent Palestinian state.

This, in turn, has paved the way for Israel to annex part or even all of the West Bank. When Yoram Ettinger, the Israeli right's demographic "expert," was asked in 2021 how he would deal with the fact that between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea there are roughly the same number of Jews and Palestinians, he [explained](#) that "Gaza is not in the game and is not relevant ... The area in dispute is Judea and Samaria."

David Friedman, the pro-annexation U.S. ambassador appointed by Donald Trump, agreed that after the withdrawal from Gaza, only the question of the West Bank remained relevant. "The evacuation [of Israelis] from Gaza had one salutary effect: it took 2 million Arabs out of the [demographic equation]," he [said](#) in 2016. By removing Gaza from the conversation, the

former ambassador explained, Israel could maintain a Jewish majority even if it annexed the West Bank and granted citizenship to its Palestinian residents.

A Strategic Power Vacuum

One of Hamas's stated reasons for the October 7 attack was to shatter the illusion that Gaza is a separate entity, and to return the Strip and the entire Palestinian cause back to history. In this, it has undoubtedly succeeded.

However, even after October 7, Israel has largely continued to ignore the connection between Gaza and the West Bank, as well as its [centrality to the Palestinian struggle](#) as a whole. Israel has consistently refused to articulate a coherent plan for the "day after" because doing so necessarily requires addressing the Strip's status within the broader Israeli-Palestinian context. Any such discussion fundamentally undermines Israel's carefully cultivated separation policy.

In addition to its utter brutality, Israel's current assault on Gaza differs in important ways from previous wars. Never before has Israel allowed a territory under its military control to go essentially ungoverned. When the Israeli army first occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, it immediately established a military government that assumed responsibility for the civil administration of the lives of the occupied residents. When it occupied southern Lebanon in 1982, it didn't dismantle the existing Lebanese government; after establishing a "security zone" in 1985, Israel handed over responsibility for civilian affairs to a local militia.

This stands in stark contrast to the current operation. Despite the fact that Israel effectively controls [large parts of Gaza](#), Israel treats Gaza's 2.3 million residents as though they are living in a vacuum.

For obvious reasons, Israel sees the Hamas government that ruled the Strip for 16 years as illegitimate — but it doesn't view the PA, which administers parts of the West Bank, as a suitable alternative. Such a scenario would fully undermine Israel's separation policy: the same Palestinian entity would govern both occupied territories, and Israel would face greater pressure to negotiate the establishment of a Palestinian state.

So long as the power vacuum in Gaza exists, the right can achieve what it wants: the war can continue, Netanyahu can prolong his time in office, and there can be no real possibility of opening peace negotiations, which even the Americans now seem eager to restart. The messianic-nationalist right also wants to maintain this limbo because it opens the door to the possibility of so-called "[voluntary migration](#)" of Palestinians from Gaza, which is National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir's ultimate wish, or to the "[total annihilation](#)" of Gaza's population centers, which is Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich's goal. Both believe that red-roofed Israeli settlements [lie at the other end](#) of this period of limbo.

Two Visions for Gaza

The army, however, seems tired of this vacuum. For them, it promises only endless fighting with no achievable goal, burnout among soldiers and reservists, and a mounting confrontation with the Americans, with whom Israel's defense establishment has a uniquely close relationship. The [invasion of Rafah](#) only heightened the army's displeasure.

Israel's takeover of the Rafah Crossing with Egypt has further undermined the idea that it has no responsibility for what happens in Gaza. Gallant correctly [recognized](#) that control of

the Rafah Crossing and the Philadelphi Corridor have brought Israel closer to establishing a military government in the Strip: without intending to, and certainly without admitting it, Israel appears on the precipice of governing Gaza like it governs the West Bank.

Gantz and Gallant have reacted to this situation similarly. Both are in close contact with the United States, and are also more exposed to pressure from the hostages' families whose support continues to grow among the Israeli public. Both understand very well that the continued refusal of Netanyahu, Ben Gvir, and Smotrich to discuss the "day after" prevents any possibility of reaching a deal for the hostages' release, and sentences them to a slow and certain death in Hamas' tunnels.

Gallant and Gantz's proposals for Palestinian rule are not serious, and cannot be accepted by any respected Palestinian, Arab, or international body. But they are enough to challenge the preferences of Netanyahu, Smotrich, and Ben Gvir for eternal limbo, to provoke their unholy rage, and to undermine the stability of the government.

Gantz and Gallant's statements also express an unconscious admission that Israel currently faces only two real possibilities. The first is a settlement that recognizes Gaza as an integral part of any Palestinian political entity, which would involve the return of the PA and the establishment of a united Palestinian government. The alternative is a war of attrition, which the messianic right hopes will end with the expulsion or annihilation of the Palestinians, but which will more likely end just as the First Lebanon War did: an Israel withdrawal under sustained military pressure and the entrenchment of a skilled guerrilla force on Israel's border.

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