

Research Article

Decision-Making Processes in the Swords of Iron War with Hamas

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Abstract

This article analyzes the decision-making process of Israel's government during the first phase of "Swords of Iron" war that began on October 7th, 2023 when Hamas' activists, together with its affiliates invaded the northern part of the Israeli Negev, killed about 1200 people, wounded about 4800 and kidnapped 251 residents and soldiers into Gaza Strip. Israel's government convened on the same day and declared that Israel is in a state of war. Soon after this declaration, members of the National Unity Party joined the government, and Prime Minister Netanyahu established a "War Cabinet" to manage the war. On October 7th, 2023 Israel's government decided not to allow humanitarian aid to get into Gaza Strip. Israel's government had to make several important decisions on the first part of the war, that will be analyzed based on the "Two Group Decision-Making Model", including the debates inside the Political – Security Cabinet and the government, and the way decisions were made in the end: The decision to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza Strip; The decision on a "hostage deal" that will enable the release of people abducted and held under Hamas captivity; The debate on the decision who will rule Gaza Strip on "The day after".

Keywords

Israel's Government, Decision-Making Process, "Swords of Iron War", The "Two Group Decision – Making Model", Humanitarian Aid: Hostage Deal, "The Day After"

1. Introduction

Hamas' severe attack on the kibbutzim and the towns neighboring the Gaza Strip on October 7, 2023, caught the IDF and Israel by total surprise. In the first 24 hours, from 6:29 a.m., the Hamas Nukhba forces (the commando troops; *nukhba* means "elite") and those who infiltrated with them conquered and took hold of an area some 4-5 kilometers deep inside Israel, and in some locations even more. The lack of any forewarning also accounted for the confused and disorganized, albeit often individually heroic, actions of the military and the police forces throughout the day.

This attack resulted in more than 1200 people killed by

Hamas terrorists, more than 4800 people wounded, and 251 people – men and women, elderly, children, and even a baby – were taken hostage and transferred forcibly into Gaza.

The Israeli government and the security establishment were compelled to begin making decisions regarding the catastrophic situation. On Sunday, October 8, the Israeli Security Cabinet stated that Israel is in a state of war: "The war that was forced on the State of Israel by the lethal terror attack from the Gaza Strip began on October 7, 2023, at 06:00 a.m." [37, 40]. On October 11, 2023, the National Unity Party – two of whose leaders are former chiefs of the IDF General Staff – joined the

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government to participate in the war management. When they joined the government, Prime Minister Netanyahu established a "war cabinet" that comprised three members and three observers: the Prime Minister and five additional ministers. As defined, the war cabinet would deal with decisions regarding definition of the strategic goals of the war and its operational management. The major decisions would be presented to the Security Cabinet for its approval.

This article focuses on three urgent issues that Israeli decision makers tackled during the Swords of Iron war in Gaza:

- 1) The decision to enable the flow of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip
- 2) The decision on the deal to release some of the hostages held by Hamas
- 3) The debate about the endgame in Gaza (known in Israel as "the day after")

The article analyzes decision-making processes by the Israeli government since October 7, 2023, focusing on the debates inside the war cabinet and inside the Security Cabinet. It seeks to define the decision-making models at work, the dynamics of the discussions held among each team, and their effect on the decisions made.

Regarding each issue the article analyzes the situation, the external and internal pressures and debates held within Israel's government, how the ensuing decisions were taken, and what primarily affected the decision made.

2. Foreign Policy Decision-Making Models

Foreign Policy Decision Making (FPDM) refers to the choices made by individuals, groups, or coalitions that affect a state's activities in the international arena. Such decisions are usually characterized by high levels of uncertainty, risk, and cost. There are two main approaches to FPDM research. One is the rational model, which assumes that a state, positioned as a lone actor, will try to maximize gains and cut losses while navigating the anarchic international system. The rational decision maker chooses the alternative that maximizes utility from a set of alternatives. The main model of the rational approach is the expected utility model [16, 17, 24].

The second approach is the cognitive model, which assumes that decision makers have limited ability to process information, and that instead of making efforts to gather relevant information, they choose the first acceptable "good enough" alternative. The decision makers choose an alternative from a "narrow" set of alternatives, weigh it, and if the alternative doesn't meet the requirements, move on to the next alternative until they find the one that is most satisfying [16, 17, 24]. The main models of the cognitive approach are the prospect theory [15, 21, 22], the polytheistic model [25], and the organizational politics model [10].

In a scenario they perceive as a crisis, decision makers must make fatal decisions within the constraints of high uncertainty

and time pressure [6, 33]. The decision makers must consider and weigh the available alternatives that provide the best solution to the crisis, which may include diplomatic, economic, or military action [21, 32]. When the leader must decide on a certain issue, s/he consults with an "inner circle" that includes advisors and close associates; this group, "the small group," is in fact the group that makes the decision [13, 27]. The discussions in the decision-making group can be placed on a continuum of decision-making dynamics, from "completely cohesive" [groupthink] to "completely fragmented" [polythink] [26].

In groupthink, the group that makes the decision "seeks consensus at the expense of exploring a variety of alternatives...The group exhibits self-censorship and feelings of invulnerability and does not tolerate contrary viewpoints as it seeks to consolidate its unanimity" [14]. Polythink is a group dynamic whereby different members in a decision-making unit espouse a plurality of opinions and offer divergent policy prescriptions, even dissent, which can result in intra-group conflict and a fragmented, disjointed decision-making process. Members of the polythink decision-making unit, by virtue of their disparate worldviews, institutional affiliations, and decision-making styles, typically have deep disagreements over the same decision problem [27, 28].

2.1. The Two-Group Decision-Making Model

In a situation that is perceived as a crisis, the critical decision unit is the "small group" that typically consists of a leader and very few advisors, referred to here as the Decision Design Group (DDG). The group explores different alternatives and designs its preferred course of action. Within this group we may find sometimes an "inner team" that includes the leader and one or two close advisors who actually design the preferred course of action and bring it to the DDG for discussion. This group gets assistance from the "advisory group" that comprises senior military leaders and the heads of the intelligence agencies. Once the group has agreed on a certain course of action, it is presented to a larger team – a cabinet, or government – for approval. This group is called the Decision Approval Group (DAG) (Figure 1). The dynamics of the DDG (i.e., groupthink or polythink), the dynamics of the discussion within the DAG, and the overall dynamics between these groups shape the ultimate decision [34, 37].

When the Decision Design Group agrees on its preferred course of action, the leader and his/her advisors will make an effort to gain support from the "large group" (DAG). Members of the DDG will try to convince the DAG to support the DDG's decision. They may also choose not to expose all the information, but only that information that supports their preferred course of action [34, 37].

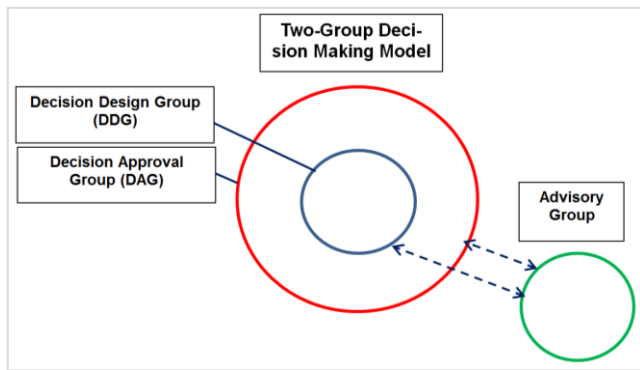


Figure 1. Two-group decision-making model.

There are several possibilities for intergroup interaction. When the dynamics of the discussions in the DDG are those of groupthink and the discussion in the DAG is also characteristic of groupthink, the course of action designed by the DDG will be adopted “as is” (e.g., the decisions of the Israeli government to launch the First and the Second Lebanon Wars). When the dynamics in both groups are those of polythink, the leader will make every effort to “impose” his/her preferred course of action, and the decision will reflect his/her choice (e.g., the debate in Israel whether to attack the missile launchers in western Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War).

2.2. The Research Question

How did the particular structures of the war cabinet and the Security Cabinet and the interaction between these two groups affect the decisions made during the war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip?

The first hypothesis is that when the dynamics of the discussions in the war cabinet tend to groupthink and the discussions in the Security Cabinet tend to groupthink, the decision designed by the war cabinet will be almost unanimously approved. According to the second hypothesis, when the dynamics of the discussions in the war cabinet tend to polythink and the dynamics in the Security Cabinet likewise tend to polythink, the decision designed in the war cabinet will spark debates in the Security Cabinet and the outcome may be a compromise that reflects a “lower common denominator,” or perhaps no decision will be made.

The dynamics of the discussions held in the war cabinet and in the Security Cabinet were primarily of groupthink or polythink. The dynamics in which the discussions were held had an effect on the decisions made. In addition, during the war management, Israeli government decisions were affected by international pressure applied (primarily) on Prime Minister Netanyahu, which prompted the government to change some of its decisions.

While many decisions regarding conduct of the Swords of Iron war were approved by the Security Cabinet, some major decisions sparked heated debate between the two cabinets. Members of the Security Cabinet with opposing opinions

insisted that these decisions be addressed within the Security Cabinet, with concomitant political pressure on the Prime Minister to adopt their positions.

2.3. The Israeli Government Decision-Making Process in the War with Hamas

On October 11, 2023, an emergency unity government was established in Israel, with the National Unity Party joining the government. MK Lt. Gen. (ret.) Benny Gantz, head of the party, had only one provision: to establish a war cabinet with the authority to manage the military operations of this war [7]. According to the agreement signed between the Likud party and the National Unity Party, the legal authority on major decisions would be held by the Security Cabinet (Figure 2). The war cabinet would propose military courses of action, including for implementation of the Security Cabinet's decisions regarding the full capacity of military (and other) actions of the war against Hamas [7].

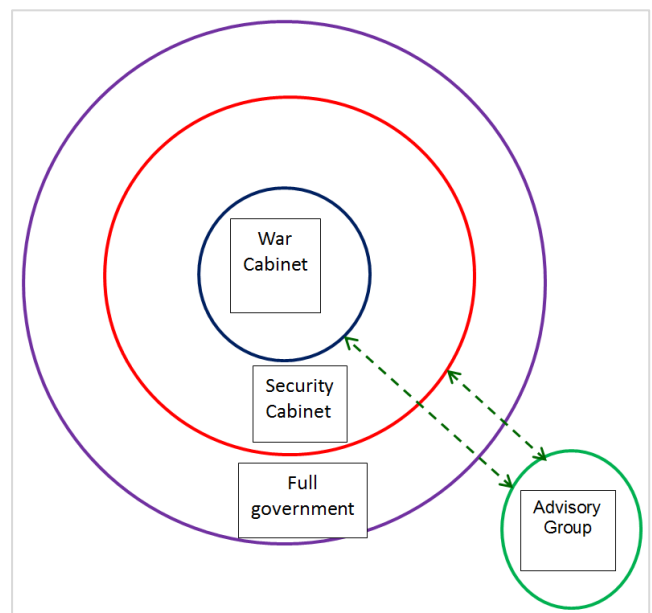


Figure 2. Israel's Decision-Making Structure in the Swords of Iron War.

Under the agreement, five members of the National Unity Party were appointed ministers. Two of them, Lt. Gen. (ret.) Benny Gantz and Lt. Gen. (ret.) Gadi Eisenkot, former IDF chiefs of staff, joined the war cabinet. The war cabinet (Figure 3) comprised three members with the right to vote: Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defense Minister Gallant, and Minister Gantz. Three others served as “observers,” (i.e., without the right to vote): Eisenkot, Dermer, and head of the Shas party, MK Aryeh Deri. Other people attending included the National Security Advisor, the military secretary to the Prime Minister, the director general of the Prime Minister's Office, and Netanyahu's chief of staff. They were joined by the “advisory

group" – IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi; the head of the Mossad, David Barnea; Ronen Bar, head of the Israel Security Agency (ISA/Shabak); and the head of Military Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva [10, 11].

Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich said in a radio inter-

view (October 14): "Our exclusion from the war cabinet is extreme; it is an exclusion of a certain sector. This is an illegitimate and outrageous move of Gantz joining the government, but I agreed to pay the price for the sake of unity" [35].

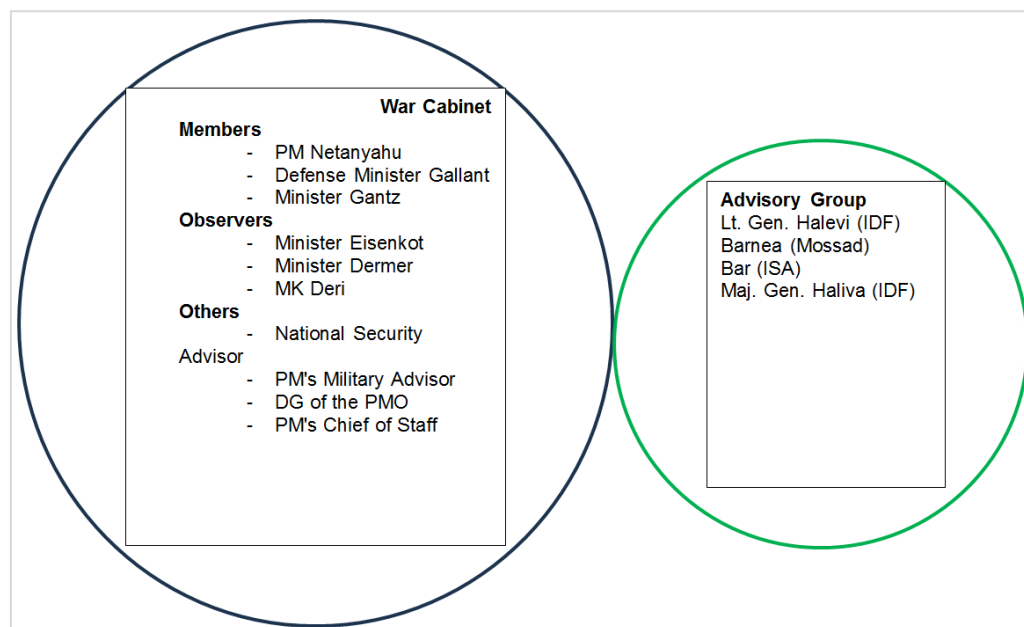


Figure 3. The war cabinet and the advisory group.

The war cabinet assumed the role of the Decision Design Group that explores all the alternatives and designs the preferred course of action. The Security Cabinet, which has the legal authority to make decisions on behalf of the government, had the role of the Decision Approval Group that discusses the proposals designed at the DDG and approves or rejects these proposals.

On October 7 Israel Air Force (IAF) began attacking Hamas' military infrastructures and headquarters in the Gaza Strip. On October 23 the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched the ground maneuver.

2.3.1. Decision A: Allowing Food and Humanitarian Aid into the Gaza Strip

On October 8, 2023, at the first cabinet meeting following the Hamas attack, Minister of Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer stated: "We're getting into a prolonged battle; we must make every effort not to hit uninvolved people and to enable the transfer of humanitarian aid to the people in the Gaza Strip, so we will have full American support" [3].

Nonetheless, that same day, the Israeli government decided to block the delivery of food, water, electricity, and fuel to Gaza, declaring that Israel is in a state of war. The following day, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant announced that he ordered the IDF to lay a "complete siege" on Gaza Strip: "No electricity, no water and no fuel will get into Gaza. We're

fighting animals and we'll react accordingly." On October 12 Minister of Energy Israel Katz announced: "Humanitarian aid to Gaza? There will be no electricity and water supply; not even one fuel tanker will get into Gaza until all the abducted Israelis are released and back home." However, on October 12, Prime Minister Netanyahu held a short press conference with diplomatic reporters and delivered the same message conveyed by Minister Dermer four days earlier [3].

On October 18, 2023, United States President Joe Biden visited Israel and discussed the war in Gaza with Prime Minister Netanyahu and the senior ministers of the war cabinet. That day, the Prime Minister's Office announced: "Following President Biden's request, Israel will not prevent humanitarian assistance from Egypt as long as it is only food, water, and medicine for the civilian population in the southern area of the Gaza Strip...and as long as these supplies do not reach Hamas" [41]. The message also emphasized that "Israel will not allow any humanitarian aid from its territory to the Gaza Strip as long as our hostages are not returned. Israel demands the Red Cross visits of our captives and is making efforts to obtain broad international support on this.

Some members of Israel's Security Cabinet opposed letting aid into Gaza unless Hamas released the hostages [31]. Public opinion in Israel likewise opposed allowing humanitarian aid into Gaza Strip as long as the hostages were not released [31]. Nevertheless, the US administration pressured Israel's gov-

ernment to allow initial humanitarian aid into Gaza Strip.

An analysis of this decision-making process indicates a sharp reversal from the firm announcements made by Israeli ministers in the first days of the war regarding allowing a humanitarian aid flow from Egypt to the southern part of the Gaza Strip. The shift of the Israeli decision makers' position was due to external pressure applied by President Biden during his visit to Israel. Israel's decision makers, with emphasis on the members of the war cabinet, felt obliged due to the US military and political backing, and the President's arrival in Israel and his demonstration of support for Israel made it almost impossible for them to reject his request.

When the IDF launched a large-scale, multi-pronged ground incursion into the Gaza Strip on October 27, Israeli forces fought in the northern area of Gaza Strip. Most of the Gaza civilians who fled to the southern part gathered in the humanitarian zones in the Mawasi and Rafah areas.

The Egyptian regime began opening the Rafah crossing on October 28, but only 170 trucks entered Gaza in the first ten days. On October 31, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby announced that following intensive diplomatic discussions with the Biden administration, Israel's government agreed to allow 100 trucks of humanitarian aid of into Gaza each day.

The Prime Minister's Office issued a statement reiterating that any humanitarian aid allowed into Gaza Strip will help Israel's military efforts, and the convoys were checked by Israel before entry (Magid, 2023). Similarly, in an interview in early November, Halevi said that "Israel could allow fuel to enter the Gaza Strip for use by hospitals in the near future" [38].

In this context, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other US officials, together with various aid groups, applied pressure on Israel's government to allow delivery of fuel to the Gaza Strip allocated to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which claimed it needed the fuel for their trucks to distribute aid and to activate power water pumps, hospitals, and more. Thus, on November 17, 2023, Israel's war cabinet agreed to an American request to allow 140,000 liters of fuel into Gaza every two days to keep UNRWA aid trucks active [29].

Opposing this decision, two ministers in the Security Cabinet criticized the decision to allow fuel into Gaza: Minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir claimed that "diesel fuel equals a weapon system," and Minister of Transportation Miri Regev claimed that "fuel for UNRWA is actually fuel for Hamas." MK Tally Gottliv from the Likud party said in the Knesset: "You deliver fuel to Gaza behind our backs? Are you out of your mind"? [3].

Following increased pressure by the US administration, on December 15, 2023, the Israeli government agreed to open another passage for aid convoys at the Kerem Shalom crossing, at the southern part of Gaza Strip. The crossing was opened during a visit by US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, who applied pressure on officials to open the

crossing [19].

Prime Minister Netanyahu, who was criticized by the public and members of the parliament from right-wing parties, justified this decision publicly: "As part of the agreement to release our people held in Gaza, Israel is committed to enable the delivery of food and humanitarian aid from Egypt to the residents in Gaza of about 200 trucks a day. Through the Rafah passage we can deliver only 100 trucks a day, and therefore we have to allow trucks to get in from Kerem Shalom passage" [4].

In January 2024 South Africa appealed to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague to order Israel to stop the war immediately, alleging it violated the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which was drawn up in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust. South Africa claimed that Israel's actions "are genocidal in character because they are intended to bring about the destruction of a substantial part" of the Palestinians in Gaza. They even claimed that Israel is "deliberately inflicting conditions meant to 'bring about their physical destruction as a group.'" And it says Israeli officials have expressed genocidal intent" [8].

On March 6, 2024, South Africa appealed to the International Court of Justice again and claimed that the humanitarian situation in Gaza Strip was deteriorating. Israel's government responded to these claims on March 15, 2024, but on March 28, 2024, the ICJ ordered Israel to enable the delivery of water, electricity, medicines, and food to the Palestinians in Gaza, and ensure that the IDF would not try to block the entry of any humanitarian aid into Gaza [31].

Assessment

Israel's militant and firm announcements in the first days following Hamas' brutal attack on October 7 that it would deny electricity, water, and any aid to the people living in the Gaza Strip transitioned into the provision of water, electricity, and convoys of trucks bringing humanitarian aid and medicines to the people in Gaza due to:

- 1) Massive pressure applied by senior figures in the US administration, chiefly, President Biden, Secretary of State Blinken, and National Security Advisor Sullivan. The strong support of the administration to Israel included a warning issued by the President to the Iranian regime and to Hezbollah's leadership not to attack Israel ("Don't!!!!", October 10, 2023) and substantiation of this warning by the dispatch of two Navy aircraft carriers to the Middle East [18]. The US support afforded the administration leverage to pressure Israel's government.
- 2) The Egyptian pressure on Israel, given Cairo's involvement and assistance in brokering the deal that enabled the release of Israeli hostages held by Hamas in Gaza.
- 3) The decision by the ICJ in January and March 2024, which posed a threat that the Court could decide to order Israel's government to stop the fighting in the Gaza Strip, prompted Israel's decision makers to allow more hu-

humanitarian aid into Gaza to demonstrate that Israel is not guilty of war crimes.

Entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza was approved despite the firm objection of some of the ministers in the Security Cabinet and despite some public opposition. The main discussions and the decision were made within the war cabinet, which held discussions characterized by dynamics tending to groupthink. The approval of the Security Cabinet also reflected the propensity to groupthink, with 2-3 ministers opposing that move.

Therefore, despite the militant announcements by government ministers and, some public opposition humanitarian aid was allowed into Gaza Strip only a month after Hamas' brutal attack on Israel, and following January 2024, the delivery of humanitarian aid intensified, including with American (and other) parachuting of food and medicines, the transfer of food from Israel's Ashdod naval port to Gaza, and the construction of the American "floating pier" at Gaza's coast to deliver more food and medicines.

2.3.2. Decision B: The Hostage Deal

Two hundred and fifty-one people were abducted by Hamas on October 7, 2023, brought to Gaza, and held there under poor conditions. There are rumors claiming that on October 8, 2023, the Qatari government proposed that Israel's government negotiate with Hamas to agree on a "humanitarian deal" that would release at least some of those taken hostage. Israel's government turned down the proposal [3].

Another report claims that not long after Hamas' brutal attack, Doha quietly reached out to the United States to discuss how to secure the release of those abducted. Since the mission required extreme sensitivity, United States officials established a "communications cell" to communicate directly with Hamas. According to a White House official, only a few people were aware of this activity.

This communication cell was established by Brett McGurk, the National Security Council's coordinator for the Middle East, and allowed the small team of negotiators to speak regularly with Israeli officials, trying to put together a deal that would free dozens of hostages held by Hamas [24]. McGurk spoke with Qatari Prime Minister Al Thani every morning; White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan communicated on a daily basis with his Israeli counterpart; and the CIA Director, William Burns, held daily discussions with David Barnea, head of the Mossad. One of the earliest proposals, put forward on October 12, 2023, called for the release of all women and children held by Hamas in Gaza, in return for Israel's release of all Palestinian women imprisoned in Israel. Israel's government rejected this proposal. but "left the door open for more talks" [24].

After the IDF launched the ground maneuver in the northern part of Gaza Strip, the United States negotiators continued to try to push Hamas, with Qatar as intermediary, to provide information on the women and children held in Gaza, but Hamas leaders refused [24].

On November 12 President Biden called Qatar's ruling emir and demanded clear identification of the estimated fifty hostages that would be freed in an initial deal. Shortly after this phone call Hamas provided the requested information. Two days later President Biden called Prime Minister Netanyahu and urged him to accept the deal [24]. A few days later McGurk arrived in Israel, and the Prime Minister told him: "We need this deal" (Lee et al., 2023). However, hours after this meeting, Hamas threatened to derail the talks and demanded that the Israeli forces that raided al-Shifa Hospital leave the hospital grounds. The Israel Defense Forces rejected the demand but indicated that it would keep the hospital running [20].

On November 15, the Prime Minister's Office announced that Prime Minister Netanyahu would hold a series of cabinet meetings: the war cabinet at 6 p.m., the Security Cabinet at 7 p.m., the full government at 8 p.m. That was the first indication in Israel that a serious deal to release hostages held in Gaza was close [39]. The two far-right parties were set to vote against the deal, but with most of the 38 government members supporting the deal, it was likely to be approved [39].

On November 17 the talks resumed, and President Biden called the Qatari Emir urging him to seal the agreement. The next day, McGurk met with Qatar's Prime Minister in Doha. The Qataris received final comments from Hamas and studied the details. On November 19 McGurk met in Cairo with Egypt's Minister of Intelligence, Abbas Kamel, who helped to bridge remaining gaps before relaying the document to Israel for its approval [39].

The deal provided for the gradual release of fifty women and children hostages in exchange for a four-day ceasefire; the ceasefire could be extended if Hamas released more hostages. In addition, "full pause of military operations" was mandated for these four days. The humanitarian aid would amount to at least 200 trucks per day and include large amounts of fuel. Israel also agreed to release 150 Palestinians – female and underage terror prisoners, none of whom were convicted of the murder of Israelis [39].

On November 22, Israel's government discussed the deal, and it was approved overwhelmingly. The Minister of National Security and his party voted against the deal; the other right-wing parties, including Finance Minister Smotrich, voted for the deal [5]. Prime Minister Netanyahu told the ministers that he expected the fighting to resume upon completion of the deal: "We will not stop after the ceasefire," he said [35].

Between November 24 and November 30, Hamas released 80 Israelis held in Gaza, as well as 24 people of foreign nationality (23 Thai citizens and one Filipino) and one person with dual Israeli-Russian citizenship. Israel released 210 Palestinians imprisoned in Israel [36].

On November 30, 2023, the war cabinet held discussions about the next phase of the deal. Minister without Portfolio and member of the war cabinet Lt. Gen. (ret.) Eisenkot argued that Israel should try to secure the release of more people in

exchange for suspending the military operation for several more days or weeks. However, the war cabinet and the security cabinet decided to resume the attacks in order to apply more military pressure on the Hamas leadership, and force it to agree to another deal to release hostages. Minister Eisenkot said that on that night it was clear to him that the next time Israel would try to broker a deal with Hamas, stopping the fighting would be much more complicated [12].

Assessment

Israel's Prime Minister was eager (via United States, Qatari, and Egyptian mediation) to reach an agreement with Hamas that would secure the release of Israeli hostages abducted by Hamas and others on October 7, 2023. Such an achievement would help Netanyahu assuage the criticism among the Israeli public for the failure to predict and thwart the October 7 attack. The US administration applied pressure on both Israel and Hamas to reach an agreement to enable the release of Israeli hostages held in Gaza.

The internal pressure of the hostages' families, together with the external pressure (mainly by the United States) and the political calculations of "achieving sympathy" among the Israeli public convinced Prime Minister Netanyahu to agree to the release of Israeli hostages in exchange for a temporary ceasefire and the release of Palestinian youths and women imprisoned in Israeli jails. Minister of National Security Ben Gvir did not support the deal and objected to a suspension of the fighting. Moreover, cognizant that the Prime Minister's proposal would be broadly supported by the Security Cabinet and by the government, he preferred to figure as someone who doesn't give up his values and instead insists on maintaining a militant course of action. This could help him garner more support among the right wing of the Israeli public.

The dynamics of the discussions held in the war cabinet tended to groupthink, as did the dynamics of the Security Cabinet, apart from Ben Gvir's objection (and initial objections by Smotrich): most of the ministers and the senior military officers supported the temporary ceasefire that would secure the release of hostages held by Hamas.

The Israeli government's decision not to extend the ceasefire to try to release more hostages, and instead to renew the fighting was due to pressure applied on the Prime Minister by the right-wing ministers who threatened that if the war were not resumed, they would consider leaving the government. Prime Minister Netanyahu prioritized the political calculation and so the war was renewed, while the excuse was that Hamas launched rockets to Israel on the morning of December 1, 2023. More than 140 Israelis were left in the hands of Hamas in Gaza, apparently due to political calculations.

2.3.3. Decision C: The Future of the Gaza Strip – "The Day After"

When the IDF launched the ground maneuver into the Gaza Strip on October 27, Israel's war cabinet defined the objectives as follows [42]:

- 1) To eliminate Hamas' military and governance capabilities

ties

- 2) To remove the security and terror threat to Israel from the Gaza Strip
- 3) To maximize the efforts needed to solve the issue of the hostages
- 4) To secure the borders of Israel and the civilian population

On December 28 the war cabinet was due to meet to discuss "the day after." Prime Minister Netanyahu canceled the meeting after fierce opposition from the right-wing members of the coalition. Minister Ben Gvir said the subject was not to be discussed at the war cabinet, as it had no mandate to deal with policy issues, while Finance Minister Smotrich announced that his party, the Religious Zionist party, was holding its own meeting in protest over his exclusion from the discussions [1]. The pressure of these ministers, who threatened to withdraw from the government and dismantle it, forced Prime Minister Netanyahu to decide that this important topic would be discussed in the Security Cabinet [2].

On December 2023 the US administration presented some of its hopes for the future of the Gaza Strip, including control of Gaza by a newly "revitalized" Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian governing body that administers parts of the West Bank. Prime Minister Netanyahu, under the pressure of the right-wing parties of his coalition, avoided formulating any kind of vision for "the day after," opting instead to highlight what he would not accept [36].

In early January 2024, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said: "Gaza residents are Palestinian. Therefore, Palestinian bodies will be in charge, with the condition that there will be no hostile actions or threats against the State of Israel" [9]. Gallant referred to "a local administration" that would be backed by Arab and international forces (Avraham.). Smotrich responded by saying that "Gallant's 'day after' plan is a re-run of the 'day before' October 7" [9]. His position was backed by the Prime Minister, who claimed that he did not share Gallant's plan [3]. Nonetheless, Prime Minister Netanyahu convened the Security Cabinet to discuss the Defense Minister's proposal. Netanyahu ultimately halted the Security Cabinet meeting after three hours of confrontational exchanges, insults, and ministers swearing at each other, once again leaving Gaza's postwar future unresolved [9]. In addition, Brig. Gen. (ret.) Yoram Hamo, a senior figure in the National Security Council, prepared a plan for the "day after." There were several discussions within the NSC, but Prime Minister Netanyahu did not allow their presentation to the Security Cabinet [9].

On February 22, 2024, Prime Minister Netanyahu presented to the Security Cabinet ministers his general post-war plan for Gaza. That was the first time Netanyahu presented any written position regarding the future of the Gaza Strip on "the day after." A senior aide to Netanyahu said that the goal was to present principles that would earn the broadest consensus possible, but added that "the consultations in the Cabinet will likely lead to changes before the policy is ap-

proved" [30, 31].

Among the main principles in the Netanyahu document:

The Israel Defense Forces will indefinitely maintain freedom of operation across the entire Gaza Strip.

Israel will create a "security zone" within Gaza territory bordering Israel "for as long as there is a security need for it."

Israel will also control the border between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, operating there "as much as possible in cooperation with Egypt and with the assistance of the U.S." to prevent smuggling [of weapon systems] from the Egyptian side of the border, including through the Rafah crossing." [30, 31].

The Gaza Strip will be completely demilitarized, except for weapons that are "necessary to maintain public order."

Israel will be responsible for monitoring the demilitarization of the enclave and ensuring it is not violated.

[Israel] aims to implement a plan for "de-radicalization of all religious, education and welfare institutions" in the Gaza Strip. This plan will be implemented "as much as possible with the involvement and assistance of Arab countries that have experience in promoting de-radicalization in their territory."

"The reconstruction plan will be carried out with the financing and leadership of countries acceptable by Israel."

"Local elements with management experience" will be responsible for civilian management and public order in Gaza. These elements "will not be identified with countries or entities that support terrorism and will not receive payment from them." [31].

Analysis of the Prime Minister's policy plan for "the day after" indicates that it is an assemblage of general ideas that aims to satisfy the right-wing members of his coalition without any concrete plan, mainly through statements regarding who will control Gaza, the freedom of operation of the Israel Defense Forces, the plan for demilitarization, de-radicalization of Gaza Strip, and more. There is no timeline, nor specific action items to be implemented. When he gave this document to the Security Cabinet ministers, he asked them to go over it carefully and said a detailed discussion will be held based on that proposed plan. This detailed discussion has not yet taken place.

On May 16, 2024, Defense Minister Gallant called on Netanyahu to present his plan for "the day after" in Gaza and rule out the option that the territory will be administered by Israel: "Since October, I have been raising this issue consistently in the Cabinet and have received no response. The end of the military campaign must come together with political action. The 'day after Hamas' will only be achieved with Palestinian entities taking control of Gaza, accompanied by international actors" [13]. Gallant added: "I must reiterate: I will not agree to the establishment of Israeli military rule in Gaza. Israel must not establish civilian rule in Gaza" [13].

Prime Minister Netanyahu responded immediately: "I am not willing to exchange Hamastan for Fatah stan," an implicit reference to the Palestinian Authority head Mahmoud Abbas, who refused to condemn the attack of October 7, 2023, and

citing polls indicating that an overwhelming majority of Palestinians, both in Gaza and in the West Bank, support Hamas' October 7 massacre. Finance Minister Smotrich also responded to Gallant's statement: "Minister Gallant today announced his support for the establishment of a Palestinian terrorist state as a reward for Hamas for the most horrific massacre of the Jewish people since the Holocaust." Smotrich called on Netanyahu to pose an ultimatum to Gallant – either implement the government's policy or resign. Smotrich and Ben Gvir have called for full Israeli civilian and military control of Gaza, the re-establishment of Israeli settlements there, and encouragement of the "voluntary immigration" of Gaza residents [13].

United States Secretary of State Blinken said at a press conference (in Kiev): "We do not support and will not support an Israeli occupation. We also, of course, do not support Hamas governance in Gaza" [13]. In an interview in June 2024, after leaving the government with his colleagues, Lt. Gen. (ret.) Eisenkot, stated:

"In November 2023 I wrote a memo to the Prime Minister and to the war cabinet members saying that for the mid-term, for a period of 6-12 months, we should establish an initial solution based on the international community, under the United States umbrella, with regional forces dominated by Egypt and elements from Gaza Strip that are not Hamas. Later, we should promote a more positive administration for the Gaza Strip that is not Hamas.

Prime Minister Netanyahu turned this issue to a political topic: the man who spoke of a two-state solution [the Bar Ilan speech of 2009] acted this way since he identified public opinion moving rightwards after the massacre of October 7. And still, even these days, he cooperates with the Palestinian Authority and allows IDF officers to meet with their Palestinian counterparts to coordinate the ongoing activity [in the West Bank]. The Prime Minister is playing both sides, without daring to see the current situation as it is" [23].

Assessment

Israel's government did not define the post-war end state for the Gaza Strip. The general definition of "the elimination of Hamas' military and governance capabilities" did not refer to the question who will control the Gaza Strip once this goal is achieved.

The debate between the cabinet ministers, especially the firm resistance of right-wing Ministers Smotrich and Ben Gvir to the Palestinian Authority's civilian control of the Gaza Strip, on the one hand, and Defense Minister Gallant's firm resistance to the civilian control by the IDF, on the other hand, positioned the Prime Minister between a rock and a hard place – between formulation and implementation of an important decision regarding the future governance of the Gaza Strip on the one hand, and concern for the political survival of his government on the other hand. For Prime Minister Netanyahu, his government's survival was the key to his own political survival.

The discussions in the war cabinet and the security cabinet

regarding "the day after" reflected the dynamics of polythink, dominated by two principal groups: a group comprising Ministers Gallant, Gantz, and Eisenkot, who objected to IDF civilian governance in Gaza Strip and supported governance by a "revitalized" Palestinian Authority. On the other hand, Ministers Smotrich and Ben Gvir, joined by Minister of Transportation Miri Regev, objected to the Palestinian Authority's governance in Gaza and supported Israeli military governance (Figure 4). Prime Minister Netanyahu, caught between these groups, decided not to discuss the most important issue thoroughly, as Prof. Gideon Rahat, a political scientist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said: "Netanyahu's refusal to lay out a firm plan is part of his 'strategy of playing for time...It's not about making decisions, it's delay-

ing decisions'" [13].

Therefore, despite the Defense Minister's efforts to devise a solution based on local elements, the Prime Minister avoided delving into this issue. To date there is no decision regarding the future governance of Gaza. That enables Hamas to continue to control civilian life in the Gaza Strip, to control all the aid convoys entering Gaza, to dictate who gets what, to attack and deny any attempt to encourage local elements to control certain areas in Gaza Strip, and to deny any attempt by Palestinian representatives from the West Bank to make any attempt to establish some kind of other civilian dominance. Thus, even with Hamas' military capabilities badly destroyed by the IDF, the civilian governance in Gaza Strip remains in the hands of Hamas' leadership.

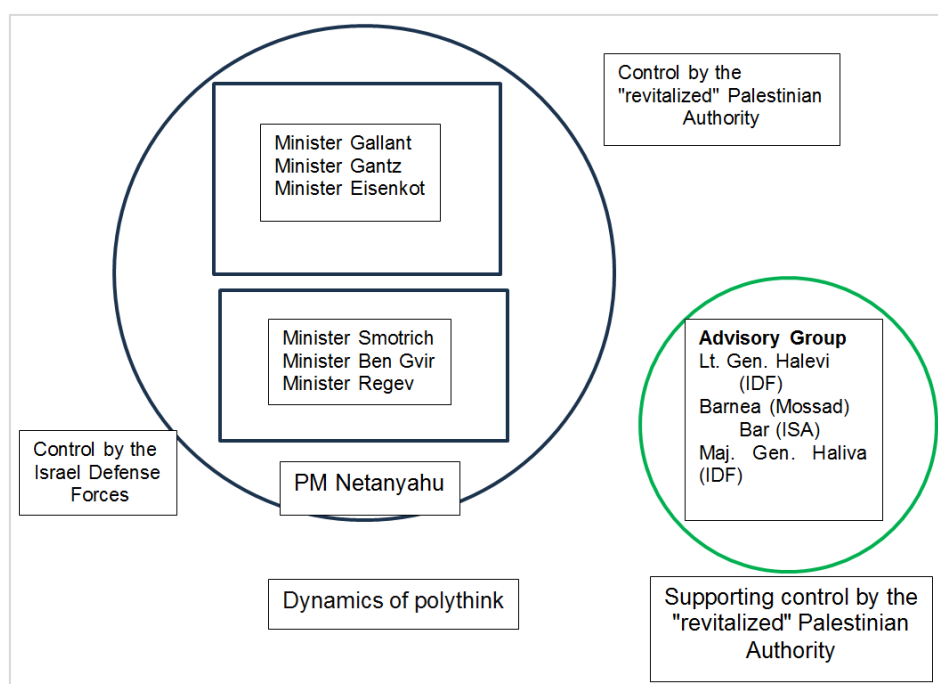


Figure 4. The debate on "the day after".

3. Discussion and Conclusions

Israel's government launched an aggressive military response to Hamas' military formations and to the Gaza Strip civilians, accusing them of taking active part in the brutal and deadly attack of October 7, 2023. The feelings of anger, frustration, and the strong drive to respond in kind drove Israel's top decision makers to make firm statements that no food, water, electricity, medicine, and or fuel will get into Gaza Strip. Only when the President of the United States came to Israel and applied direct pressure on Prime Minister Netanyahu and the war cabinet to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza Strip, did the war cabinet begin to allow a certain amount of humanitarian aid to enter Gaza.

Prime Minister Netanyahu was caught between international pressure on Israel's government on the one hand, and the opposition within the security cabinet among members who threatened to leave the government – a move that would bring down his government. When the international pressure intensified, as the international community began to parachute supplies to the Palestinians in Gaza and the South African government applied to the International Court of Justice in The Hague claiming that Israel was trying to "kill" the Palestinians by starving them, the Prime Minister and the Israeli government had no choice but to allow convoys of humanitarian aid into Gaza through the passages linking Isarel with Gaza Strip. The decision to allow humanitarian aid to Gaza Strip was unanimous within the war cabinet (dynamics of groupthink) and with some objection approved by the Security Cabinet (dynamics tending to groupthink). The decision

to broker a deal with Hamas via mediators that would secure the release of Israeli hostages in Gaza was unanimously approved by the war cabinet (dynamics of groupthink) and with almost the full support of the members of the security cabinet and of the Israeli government, with only one minister objecting (dynamics tending to groupthink).

The debate between the war cabinet and members of the security cabinet focused on the mandate to discuss and decide on "the day after" in Gaza Strip, and the debate on possible solutions – control of a "revitalized" Palestinian Authority backed and assisted by a coalition combined of international and moderate Arab states, or civilian control by the IDF until a permanent solution is arranged. The dynamics of polythink within the war cabinet and the discussions held in the security cabinet did not succeed in reaching an agreed course of action, and this issue remains unsolved until now, September 2024, almost a year after the war broke out.

This paper addresses the question: "How did the particular structures of the war cabinet and the Security Cabinet and the interaction between these two groups affect the key decisions made during the war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip?" As analyzed, most of the major issues were discussed and designed in the war cabinet, which played the role of the Decision Design Group (of the two-group decision-making model). In this group, the cabinet members debated and decided the most important issues. In addition, military operations were designed, such as enabling humanitarian aid into Gaza Strip, and the decision was reached to agree to a deal with Hamas to secure the release of Israelis held in Gaza in exchange for a ceasefire. Two of the analyzed decisions made in the war cabinet were approved by the security cabinet, which played the role of the Decision Approval Group. Though there were debates within the Security Cabinet and at least one minister firmly objected to these decisions, the decision on humanitarian aid and the decision on the deal to release hostages held by Hamas were approved almost unanimously.

The discussions on civilian control of the Gaza Strip on "the day after" bore the dynamics of polythink in the discussions held in the Security Cabinet. These dynamics denied the ability to reach an agreed solution and this issue is still not decided.

The first research hypothesis postulated claimed that when

the dynamics of the discussions in the war cabinet tended to groupthink and the discussions in the Security Cabinet tended to groupthink, the decision that was designed in the war cabinet would be approved almost unanimously. As analyzed, this hypothesis was validated regarding both the decision to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza Strip and the decision to broker a deal with Hamas on a ceasefire that would release a limited number of hostages. In these two cases the dynamics of the discussions held in the war cabinet bore the dynamics of groupthink: all the ministers and the advisors attending these discussions agreed on these two decisions. The discussions held in the Security Cabinet bore the dynamics of tending to groupthink, and most of the ministers approved the proposed courses of action presented by the members of the war cabinet. Though two or three ministers objected, the courses of action proposed by the members of the war cabinet won large agreement by the ministers of the Security Cabinet.

The second research hypothesis posited that when the dynamics of the discussions in the war cabinet tended to polythink and the discussions in the Security Cabinet also tended toward polythink, the decision designed in the war cabinet would spark greater debate in the Security Cabinet and the outcome may be a compromise that reflects a lower common denominator, or no decision will be made. As analyzed, this hypothesis was validated regarding the discussions of "the day after." Two members of the Security Cabinet, Ministers Ben Gvir and Smotrich, objected most vehemently to discussion of this most important issue in the war cabinet, claiming that the mandate to discuss this issue lay exclusively with the Security Cabinet. The discussions in the Security Cabinet reflected the dynamics of polythink – one group of ministers (Gallant, Gantz, and Eissenkot) ruled out the idea that the IDF maintain civilian control of the Gaza Strip until a permanent solution is adopted (which might take a very long time) and supported transferring civilian control to the "revitalized" Palestinian Authority, backed by international forces and moderate Arab states. On the other hand, another group of ministers (Ben Gvir, Smotrich, Regev) rejected the idea of Palestinian Authority control over Gaza Strip and urged that the IDF maintain temporary civilian control over the Gaza Strip. These disagreements were so deep that the discussions on "the day after" stopped, and no decision was made regarding this very important issue.

Table 1. *The dynamics of the discussions held and its outcome.*

The decision	The dynamics in the war cabinet	The dynamics in the Security Cabinet	The outcome
Enabling entry of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip	Groupthink	Tending to Groupthink	The decision was approved
To broker a deal with Hamas – the release of abducted Israelis in exchange for a ceasefire	Groupthink	Tending to Groupthink	The decision was approved
Who has civilian control of the Gaza Strip on "the day after"	Polythink	Polythink	No decision was made

Abbreviations

IDF Israel Defense Forces

Author Contributions

Amnon Sofrin is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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