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Stabilizing Gaza and Shaping a Political Horizon: Conditions for an Effective International Stabilization Force

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This paper should be read as complementary to IPI's ongoing analytical and policy work on Gaza's stabilization and post-conflict arrangements. It aims to inform senior policymakers, diplomats, and practitioners currently engaged in shaping or responding to the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2803 (2025). The paper draws on IPI-led consultations and off-the-record discussions held in 2025 with regional actors, UN officials, member-state representatives, Israeli and Palestinian experts, and international partners. It is designed to support near-term decision-making while situating immediate stabilization debates within a broader political and regional framework.

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Introduction

The formation of the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG) in January 2026, followed by the announcement of the international “Board of Peace” (BOP) and its Executive Board, marks the transition to Phase Two of the Comprehensive Plan to End the Gaza Conflict (also known as the 20-point plan). This transition comes two months after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2803 on November 17, 2025, which was drafted by the United States. This resolution endorsed President Donald Trump's 20-point plan, recognized the Gaza Board of Peace (since referred to as the Gaza Executive Board) as a “transitional administration,” and authorized it to establish an International Stabilization Force (ISF) for an initial two-year period.

While the transition to Phase Two may signal renewed momentum following two months of stalled progress amid a highly volatile security environment and severe humanitarian conditions in Gaza, substantial uncertainty persists regarding the ISF's mandate, composition, and deployment, including its troop ceiling, expectations related to the use of force, the scope of civilian protection activities, and, most significantly, modalities for the disarmament of armed groups, including Hamas. As a key operational pillar of Phase Two, the ISF is envisaged as critical to taking forward the process, including by enabling the disarmament of Hamas, the Israeli military withdrawal, and the emergence of a new Palestinian governance arrangement. In this regard, the formation of the NCAG—chaired by Ali Shaath and composed of fifteen senior technocrats and private sector figures—addresses the immediate requirement for a non-Hamas civil administration and is expected to initiate the reconstruction of infrastructure in Gaza. However, the scope of the committee's authority, particularly in relation to the ISF, the Gaza Executive Board, and the Board of Peace, remains insufficiently defined. Crucially, Resolution 2803 remains vague on the long-term political horizon for Palestinians and the broader resolution of the conflict.

As a result, many issues will require clarification in the coming weeks to establish a shared understanding among key actors—an essential foundation for the generation of required troops and police and the effective implementation of the ISF's mandate. This issue brief unpacks these issues and surfaces the questions that would benefit from candid discussion among potential troop- and police-contributing countries, Security Council members, other international and regional partners, and, crucially, Israeli and Palestinian stakeholders.

Anchoring Stabilization in a Credible Political Horizon and Palestinian Agency

One weakness in Resolution 2803's proposal for the ISF is the absence of a clearly articulated political end state. Lessons from past stabilization efforts show that such missions succeed only when anchored in a clear political strategy. Without an explicitly defined political horizon—including a pathway toward Palestinian self-determination and the reintegration of Gaza and the West Bank—the ISF risks mission creep. While the ISF will operate under the strategic guidance of the Board of Peace, there are risks that the military presence of the ISF could remain siloed from broader efforts to achieve a political solution to the conflict and the reconstruction of Gaza.

A political framework is needed not only to define the ISF's objectives but also to ensure its design and implementation reinforce Palestinian agency. There is no Palestinian representation in the senior decision-making structures of the Board of Peace and its Executive Board, and the Palestinian-led National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG) has a limited mandate. It will also be challenging to ensure the timely deployment of a vetted Palestinian police force alongside a progressive Israeli military withdrawal. In this context, the ISF risks assuming de facto governing functions. This could lead Palestinians to perceive the force as extending external control or indirectly advancing Israeli security priorities rather than supporting a transition toward Palestinian self-governance.

The ISF's geographically confined mandate in Gaza, if not explicitly coordinated with developments in the West Bank, may reinforce territorial fragmentation rather than enable a coherent pathway toward a future Palestinian state. Without meaningful Palestinian participation in shaping and implementing Phase Two, the ISF may struggle to establish the local legitimacy necessary for its sustained effectiveness, potentially creating space for armed actors to mobilize opposition to an externally driven governance arrangement.

Local acceptance of an international presence will depend on its integration with a credible political

horizon, its relationship to the NCAG, and its visible contribution to improving living conditions. This includes reconstruction efforts—through engineering and logistical support—that deliver tangible, early benefits to Gaza's population. Stabilization is unlikely to be durable unless paired with Palestinian-led initiatives that are perceived locally as advancing Palestinian priorities rather than solely managing insecurity.

The current Israeli government's opposition to a Palestinian state remains the main obstacle to a political horizon, though Resolution 2803 offers openings by referencing Palestinian self-determination, statehood, and renewed negotiations on a political horizon for peaceful and prosperous coexistence. It also calls for a transitional Palestinian administration and the reassertion of the Palestinian Authority's control, signaling limited recognition of Palestinian governance. While it does not cite prior UN resolutions, the resolution references the New York Declaration on the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, providing a potential foundation for the ISF.

Although the ISF's deployment will be confined to Gaza, the territory cannot be treated in isolation from the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Political, institutional, and infrastructural bridges must be rebuilt between these territories and, progressively, between Israel and Palestine through shared governance mechanisms, moving beyond separation-based approaches that have repeatedly failed. Similarly, the Board of Peace should provide administrative support to the nonpolitical, technocratic NCAG in preparing the ground for the integration of the West Bank and Gaza's governance systems, including through the unification of legal frameworks, in preparation for a transition to a reformed Palestinian Authority as stipulated in the resolution. Moving away from framing the Board of Peace as an external governing body can create space to empower local, nonpolitical, and technocratic Palestinian governance under international oversight and help ensure that the ISF is viewed as an impartial, temporary mechanism aimed at transferring its responsibilities to legitimate Palestinian institutions as early as conditions allow.

Key Questions for Policymakers:

- How can the tension be resolved between the initial expectations of some stakeholders that the force would engage in peace enforcement and the reality that contributing countries will not deploy troops to a peace enforcement operation?
- What security guarantees could be provided to contributing countries that would also help ensure that the ceasefire holds?
- How could a clearly defined concept of operations (CONOPS) and rules of engagement for the ISF help mitigate the concerns of potential troop and police contributors that they could become “subcontractors” for Israeli security forces?

Clarifying the Division of Labor and Sequencing

The ISF will not be deploying into a vacuum. The US-backed Civil–Military Coordination Center (CMCC) has been operational since October 2025, coordinating humanitarian access and logistics from Kiryat Gat in southern Israel. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) continue to occupy approximately 53 percent of the Gaza Strip. UN agencies and other humanitarian and reconstruction actors are also present, with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) alone comprising 11,000–12,000 personnel in Gaza (and another 4,000 in the West Bank). The EU maintains two missions in the West Bank and Gaza: the EU Mission for the Support of Palestinian Police and Rule of Law (EUPOL COPPS) and the EU Border Assistance Mission for the Rafah Crossing Point (EUBAM Rafah). In parallel, Egypt and Jordan have already begun training Palestinian police.

Against this complex backdrop, it will be essential to clarify roles and responsibilities and to ensure effective deconfliction among the numerous actors on the ground. The sequencing of the ISF’s deployment, the rollout of the vetted Palestinian police force, and the phased withdrawal of the IDF must

be carefully calibrated to prevent security vacuums, the reemergence of Hamas as a de facto security provider, or delays in the IDF’s withdrawal—all of which would undermine the ISF’s credibility. An important step in this direction is Resolution 2803’s inclusion of language tying the IDF’s withdrawal to “standards, milestones, and timeframes linked to demilitarization,” though these parameters have yet to be determined and agreed upon by the IDF, the ISF, regional guarantors, and the United States. Identifying what these standards are and achieving consensus on when they have been met will be politically difficult.

Establishing clear timelines and sequencing for reconstruction, elections, and a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process would strengthen the ISF’s operational effectiveness. Lessons from past DDR programs indicate that success requires embedding disarmament in a broader political framework with agreed benchmarks, a reconciliation process, security sector reform—including the possible integration of vetted ex-combatants into the Palestinian police—and meaningful political participation. The resolution does not refer to DDR but instead to a “process of demilitarizing” and the “permanent decommissioning of weapons from non-state armed groups.” The 20-point plan also states that “Hamas and other factions agree to not have any role in the governance of Gaza, directly, indirectly, or in any form.” However, these issues are likely to reemerge once it becomes evident that the ISF cannot forcibly disarm armed groups and that Hamas retains significant political influence.

Conversely, the absence of defined political or strategic benchmarks—essential for accountability—risks undermining the ISF’s momentum, coherence, and public legitimacy. No actor has been designated to oversee these tasks or to support the reintegration of ex-combatants into a functioning civil administration capable of basic governance and institutional reconstruction. It remains unclear how the NCAG, as a nonpolitical, technocratic committee, could meaningfully carry out these responsibilities without substantial support from a robust international civilian mission.

Key Questions for Policymakers:

- How can operational and strategic coordination between the ISF and other key international and local stakeholders on the ground be ensured?
- How should the ISF's mandate be sequenced across the stabilization and reconstruction phases, as well as its progressive expansion to new areas as the IDF withdraws?
- How will the disarmament of Hamas and the withdrawal of the IDF be sequenced? How can the BOP and ensure adherence to agreed benchmarks?

Anticipating Spoilers and Planning for Crisis Scenarios

Expectations for the ISF vary widely—and will continue to do so—especially if its mandate remains broad and ambiguous. Many Palestinians will expect the ISF to protect them from Israel and, in some cases, also from armed groups operating in Gaza. Hamas, by contrast, views the ISF primarily as a buffer force facilitating the withdrawal of Israeli forces. The current Israeli government appears to expect little from the ISF beyond applying some pressure on Hamas's activities—and, critically, not constraining Israel's ability to conduct military operations against Hamas militants when it deems necessary.

Potential spoilers will require careful and ongoing analysis. Armed groups—including Hamas, its alQassam Brigades, and Islamic Jihad—could see the ISF as a threat to their de facto authority or as a proxy for Israel, especially if the mission begins searching for weapons, and might therefore resort to asymmetric attacks. Criminal networks and militias—some of which Hamas itself has targeted for allegedly collaborating with Israel—could also pose significant risks. To remain credible, the ISF must be capable of deterring various spoilers while maintaining and effectively communicating sufficient impartiality, including during upcoming electoral periods in both Israel and Palestine.

The IDF itself could also become a source of risk to the ISF—particularly if Israeli security concerns are

not adequately addressed or if Israel perceives that it lacks sufficient control over the mission. This risk includes direct security threats, such as Israeli strikes against Hamas in areas where the ISF is deployed, or scenarios in which the ISF is caught in crossfire between the IDF and Hamas. The ISF could also face reputational risks if Israeli military operations result in civilian harm and Palestinians blame the ISF for failing to provide protection. Managing such crises would likely be beyond the ISF's own remit and would necessitate higher-level political intervention, particularly from the United States.

An ISF that contributes to broader regional security and economic frameworks—and that helps pave the way for the normalization of Israel's relations with Arab and Muslim-majority states—could help mitigate these risks. Nevertheless, robust contingency planning for such scenarios is essential.

Key Questions for Policymakers:

- How can the ISF ensure it has buy-in from the Palestinian public—including Hamas sympathizers while contributing to Israeli security needs so that distrust on both sides does not undermine its efforts or the broader political process?
- What predefined escalation ladders and response mechanisms can the ISF plan for in the event of an IDF strike in an ISF-secured area or an attack on ISF forces? What contingency plans can it have in the case of renewed hostilities or ceasefire violations?

Conclusion and Way Forward

Taken together, these considerations underscore that the ISF's success will depend not only on its operational design but also on its integration with a credible political end state, a coherent reconstruction strategy, and a realistic assessment of the environment in which it will deploy. Clarity on mandate, sequencing, roles, and accountability; meaningful Palestinian participation; coordinated engagement with international and regional actors; and robust risk management are all essential to

ensure the ISF contributes to—rather than complicates—Gaza’s transition. Its viability will hinge on its legitimacy, which requires Palestinian and Israeli consent, time-bound sequencing, and frameworks that link Gaza’s reconstruction to a durable political horizon.

The ISF should be understood not as an end state but as a transitional mechanism: a bridge from war to renewed Palestinian governance and from a fragile ceasefire to a credible political process. To serve this function, it must be embedded in a broader process for reconnecting Gaza with the West Bank, verifying Israeli withdrawals, advancing a meaningful horizon for Palestinian self-determination, and strengthening regional security in ways that both Palestinians and Israelis can accept. On its own, the ISF risks becoming another short-lived security arrangement; as part of a broader process, it could help translate the ceasefire into stabilization and stabilization into political progress.

Testing the political realism and operational feasibility of the ISF prior to its deployment will therefore be essential. Scenario-based planning can help clarify sequencing and the division of labor, identify risks and confidence-building measures, and foster a shared understanding among the actors whose cooperation will ultimately determine the mission’s viability. To this end, the International Peace Institute (IPI) has initiated a series of tabletop scenario-based exercises on the ISF, bringing together member states, including

countries from the region and potential troop and police contributors, UN officials, and other experts. A first workshop was held in New York in January 2026, with a second planned to be held in the region later in the year.

At the strategic level, the United States remains the central driver of the process. Resolution 2803 provides Washington with a mandate to facilitate negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, while the endorsement of the US plan implicitly positions it to clarify unresolved issues, including disarmament modalities, the role of the Board of Peace, criteria for Israeli withdrawals, Palestinian-led governance arrangements, and links to a broader peace process. This also places the United States in a pivotal position to engage Hamas on the parameters of Phase Two.

By contrast, the Security Council’s leverage following the adoption of Resolution 2803 is limited. It will receive reports from the Board of Peace every six months, which offers only modest oversight and largely insulates the ISF from the council’s sustained engagement. Leverage over the ISF now resides primarily with the countries contributing troops, police, and finance. Their participation—and continued support could be conditioned on clearer political parameters, potentially through a follow-on Security Council resolution that reasserts the core principles guiding the ISF and provides greater strategic guidance for the force and the transition it is meant to support.

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