

PEACE AND SECURITY

DONOR ENGAGEMENT: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Palestinian Perspectives on the
Reconstruction of Gaza

Nur Arafah
November 2024



Israel's war on Gaza since October 7, 2023, has caused severe human, economic, and social devastation. Reconstruction efforts need to address past failures and current unprecedented challenges.



Previous reconstruction efforts have been top-down and ignored Israel's blockade and occupation. Gazan knowledge and ownership have been excluded, the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism allowed for control by Israel and normalisation of the blockade. Major funding gaps also hindered reconstruction.



Reconstruction amid the ongoing war has to speak to unprecedented challenges. A strategy should encompass a multi-dimensional approach addressing political, economic, and societal needs, local ownership and inclusion, aligning micro and macro-level planning, and promoting food security and sustainable agriculture.

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Israel's war on the Gaza Strip since October 7, 2023, has wrought unprecedented devastation. The human, economic and social losses of the war are overwhelming and will adversely affect generations. As the international community grapples with the prospect of rebuilding Gaza, it is crucial to critically examine past reconstruction efforts as well as to address current challenges in order to envision a new effective strategy.



Past reconstruction efforts have been flawed due to an approach that has ignored the political dimensions including Israel's blockade and occupation. The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism has allowed Israel to control reconstruction processes and normalise the blockade. Further, a top-down approach has excluded Gazan civil society and knowledge, denying ownership and self-determination. Lastly, a major funding gap has persisted especially due to donor fatigue and regional politics.



Reconstruction will be a complex and non-linear process. A strategy should draw on lessons learned and include four essential elements: viewing reconstruction as a multi-dimensional process encompassing physical, political, economic, and societal aspects, ensuring local ownership and inclusive participation, integrating micro-level strategies with macro-level planning, and promoting food production and sustainable agriculture.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://palestine.fes.de/topics/palestinian-perspectives-on-the-reconstruction-of-gaza>

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In cooperation with:

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1

INTRODUCTION

Israel's war on the Gaza Strip, ongoing since 7 October 2023, has wrought unprecedented devastation. The human, economic and social losses of the war are overwhelming. Destruction of health care and education infrastructure, damage to agricultural land and markets, the loss of job opportunities and the social trauma caused by the war will all adversely affect generations to come. As the international community grapples with the prospect of rebuilding Gaza, it is crucial to critically examine past efforts, confront current challenges and envision new approaches for the future.

Previous reconstruction efforts have been marred by systemic flaws, stemming primarily from the prevailing apolitical, top-down approach to rebuilding and the establishment of an ineffective reconstruction mechanism that reinforced Israel's control. These past shortcomings, coupled with the staggering scale of the ongoing devastation, the absence of clear governance structures and the uncertainty about when and even whether this war will end, present formidable obstacles to effective reconstruction in the future. But although the path forward is fraught with complexities, it is important to work out a new, more effective strategy. This approach should reimagine reconstruction as a manifold process with physical, political, economic and societal dimensions, which prioritises local ownership, integrates micro- and macro-level strategies, and focuses on rebuilding critical systems, such as food production, to help put Gaza back on its feet again.

2

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF DONOR ENGAGEMENT IN EARLIER RECONSTRUCTION EFFORTS IN GAZA

The ongoing war is Israel's sixth assault on the Strip since it imposed a land, air and sea blockade on Gaza in 2006. After each war, damage and needs assessment exercises were conducted by international organisations to guide rebuilding efforts. However, these reconstruction plans have consistently fallen short of meeting the needs of the population and rebuilding Gaza, resulting in a growing backlog of unaddressed needs in the wake of each successive war. The ineffectiveness of past reconstruction efforts can be attributed to four key factors: an apolitical approach to reconstruction; a flawed rebuilding mechanism; a top-down model of reconstruction; and unmet donor funding promises.

A DEPOLITICISED APPROACH TO RECONSTRUCTION

The prevailing approach to reconstruction by donor countries and international organisations has so far been largely apolitical, focusing on technical aspects and physical rebuilding needs, and lacking a comprehensive political framework. This narrow perspective has framed reconstruction largely as a technical and humanitarian process, overlooking the critical political dimensions in play, including Israel's ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip and the broader context of occupation.

Past rebuilding rounds have made it clear that meaningful reconstruction cannot materialise within the confines of the siege and the occupation. The failure to link reconstruction efforts to ending Israel's blockade and achieving Palestinian political rights has only further normalised the oppressive conditions that 2.3 million Gazans have endured over the past 17 years. This has resulted in flawed and ineffective reconstruction efforts that have essentially provided band-aid solutions to deeply rooted political problems, preventing any possibility of sustainable reconstruction. Meanwhile, the absence of a political process has trapped Gaza in a vicious cycle of war, ceasefire and failed reconstruction efforts.

AN INEFFECTIVE, FLAWED RECONSTRUCTION MECHANISM

The second factor behind the failure of past reconstruction efforts is related to the main framework that has constrained such initiatives in Gaza, namely the Gaza Recon-

struction Mechanism (GRM). Established as a trilateral agreement between the Palestinian Authority (PA), the Israeli government and the United Nations (UN) following the 2014 war, the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism was conceived as a temporary measure to speed up the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip by streamlining the import of goods, while ostensibly paving the way towards lifting the siege and achieving peace. Under this mechanism, the UN, in coordination with the Palestinian Authority, monitors and records the movement of construction materials into Gaza in a database. Israel then examines the database to determine which materials are to be permitted entry into Gaza.

However, the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism has proven to be a flawed and ineffective mechanism, essentially becoming another tool of domination that has allowed Israel to control reconstruction while normalising and perpetuating the blockade. More specifically, instead of expediting reconstruction, the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism has impeded the rebuilding process, allowing Israel to impose heavy restrictions on the import of construction materials into Gaza (CHS 2021). The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism has also introduced a highly bureaucratic and inefficient process that has slowed down the pace of reconstruction significantly (Gold 2021). In 2015, Oxfam reported that reconstructing schools, hospitals and houses in Gaza could take up to a century if the siege and Israeli-imposed restrictions on the import of construction materials were not lifted (OXFAM 2021). Hence, three years following the 2014 war, 43 per cent of the homes that were demolished or heavily damaged were yet to be rebuilt (UNSCO 2017). And although the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism underwent some reforms in 2019 to improve its functioning and effectiveness, it has remained a key tool used by Israel to control Gaza's reconstruction (OCHA 2019).

The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism not only constitutes a mechanism that has entrenched existing structures of control, but it is also an economically profitable arrangement for Israeli businesses. Israel has leveraged its control over which construction materials can enter Gaza to ensure that most materials come from Israeli companies and benefit the Israeli economy. For instance, Nesher, an Israeli cement enterprise that has monopoly power in both the Israeli and Palestinian markets, has reaped significant financial profits through the exploitation of Gaza's reconstruction (Who Profits 2016).

Table 1
Status of donor disbursements of pledges for Gaza reconstruction (July 2017)

	Pledges made at Cairo conference (in US\$ million)	Funds disbursed to Gaza as of July 2017 (in US\$ million)	% of unmet pledges
Qatar	1,000	216.06	78.4%
Saudi Arabia	500	107.8	78.4%
UAE	200	59.08	70.5%
Kuwait	200	62.63	68.7%
Bahrain	6.5	5.15	20.7%
Total GCC	1,906.5	450.72	76.4%
Total worldwide	3,500	1,851	47.0%

Source: World Bank, Economic Monitoring Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, 18 September 2017 (World Bank 2017).

A TOP-DOWN RECONSTRUCTION MODEL

The third critical flaw of past reconstruction efforts is their predominantly external, top-down approach, which has largely disregarded input from the affected Gazan population. A prime example of this occurred following the 2014 war, when local civil society organisations and Gaza-based governing entities were excluded from the establishment of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism and broader discussions about reconstruction strategies. The exclusion of Gaza-based representatives was problematic for three main reasons: it deprived the population of any sense of ownership over the reconstruction process; it denied Gazans their right to self-determination by preventing them from having a say in shaping their own future; and it failed to leverage the valuable indigenous knowledge accumulated by the people of Gaza who have lived through several cycles of destruction and rebuilding.

UNFULFILLED DONOR FUNDING COMMITMENTS

Past reconstruction efforts in Gaza were also impeded by the wide gap between the pledges made by donors and the actual disbursements made. For instance, following the 2014 war on Gaza, while donors pledged 5.4 billion US dollars (US\$) for the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) (UN-ISPAL 2016), of which US\$ 3.5 billion were intended for Gaza, only 53 per cent of the funding promises made to Gaza were met by July 2017, three years after the war (World Bank 2017). Some 40 per cent of participants (21 out of the total of 53) have not kept the promises they made at the Cairo conference, which meant that only 18 per cent of reconstruction needs had been met by July 2017 (World Bank 2017).

Of the total unfulfilled pledges, 88 per cent originated from Gulf countries (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE and Bahrain), as these nations failed to deliver 76.4 per cent of their committed funds by July 2017 (see Table 1) (World Bank 2017). Hence, when the 2021 war broke out, efforts were still being made to secure funds to repair the damage from the 2014 war (Al-Hallaq 2021).

The shortfalls in donor funding pledges can be attributed to a number of factors. Western states, experiencing donor fatigue and a sense of futility after seeing previous investments in Gaza being destroyed by war, have become hesitant to commit additional funds for reconstruction. As for Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which oppose Hamas because of its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, they believed that delaying aid and reconstruction might weaken Hamas, increase opposition to it and, potentially, restore the political order that existed before Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007. Meanwhile, Qatar, which maintains close ties with Hamas, has provided the highest amount of aid for Gaza reconstruction among Gulf Cooperation Council countries, amounting to US\$ 216.06 million by July 2017, although this was well short of the US\$ 1 billion the country committed itself to (World Bank 2017).

3

AN UNPRECEDENTED CRISIS: RECONSTRUCTION CHALLENGES IN GAZA

While the critical need for a new, effective reconstruction strategy for Gaza is clear, it is also important to address four unique challenges currently affecting reconstruction efforts.

THE STAGGERING SCALE OF DESTRUCTION

The ongoing war on Gaza is unprecedented in the scale of its destruction and civilian casualties. As of early November 2024, over 43,374 Palestinians had been killed, more than double the 1948 Nakba casualties (PCBS 2016; PCBS 2024a), tens of thousands are buried under the rubble, and more than 20,000 children are missing (Save the Children 2024). These figures, which are likely to be huge underestimates, suggest that nearly 7 per cent of Gaza's population has been killed or injured or is missing, not accounting for deaths from hunger and disease (Khatib, McKee, Yusuf 2024).

The extent of the destruction in Gaza cannot be exaggerated and has not been seen since the Second World War. By early November 2023, Israel had already dropped the equivalent of two nuclear bombs on Gaza (Euro-Med Monitor 2023). In the first 200 days of the war, more than 70,000 tonnes of explosives were dropped by the Israeli military on the Gaza Strip, surpassing the bombs dropped on London, Dresden and Hamburg combined during the Second World War (Euro-Med Monitor 2024). The UN has estimated that rubble clearance alone could take up to 15 years and cost around US\$ 500–600 million.¹

The scale of destruction in Gaza has created a multifaceted crisis with far-reaching consequences. Gaza's infrastructure has been systematically dismantled, as part of Israel's apparent plan to make Gaza unliveable. The devastation includes: 117+ schools/ universities destroyed (332 partially destroyed); 87,000 housing units destroyed (297,000 partially); in addition to hundreds of water wells that have been de-

molished. The health care infrastructure has also been devastated: 34 hospitals and 68 health centres have been attacked and rendered out of service so far (PCBS 2024b).

This widespread destruction has triggered a public health emergency. The collapse of waste management and sewage systems, combined with the lack of clean water and personal hygiene, has led to a polio epidemic, declared on 29 July 2024, and thousands of cases of hepatitis (Al Jazeera 2024a). Simultaneously, the destruction of agricultural land and Israeli restrictions on aid delivery have led to a crisis of food insecurity (Financial Times 2024), pushing Gaza to the brink of famine (Lewis 2024).

The long-term implications of the war are equally dire. UNDP has projected that the war is likely to erase seven decades of progress, potentially setting back Gaza's health, education and economic indicators to 1955 levels (UNDP 2024). Moreover, the psychological trauma inflicted by the war will have enduring effects on the population's mental health and development for generations to come.

The path to reconstruction is thus daunting. UNDP has estimated that reconstruction costs could reach US\$ 50 billion and that rebuilding houses in Gaza could take until 2040 in the most optimistic scenario, underscoring the immense challenges facing Gaza in rebuilding not just its physical infrastructure, but also its social and economic fabric in the aftermath of such unprecedented destruction (Al Jazeera 2024b).

WHAT IF THE WAR HAS NO END?

Another critical challenge facing Gaza's reconstruction efforts stems from the nature of the current war. Conventional reconstruction models typically assume a clear end to hostilities before rebuilding can commence. However, the situation in Gaza presents a much more complex scenario. The fundamental question is, what if this war never ends, but instead shifts between high-intensity and lower-intensity phases? This possibility forces us to reconsider the timing of reconstruction efforts. Can we afford to wait for a clear end to the war before beginning the reconstruction process? If not, how can urgent needs be addressed and rebuilding occur while hostilities continue?

¹ "It would take up to 15 years to clear around 40 million tonnes of war rubble in #Gaza says @UNEP. The effort would need 100+ trucks and cost over \$500 million. Debris poses a deadly threat for people in the #GazaStrip as it can contain unexploded ordnance and harmful substances." UNRWA tweet on X, 15/07/2024, <https://x.com/UNRWA/status/1812815626723086584>.

This scenario raises several critical questions about the nature of reconstruction in an ongoing war zone. What are the risks of initiating reconstruction efforts during periods of relative calm? What strategies can be employed to protect reconstruction efforts in an unstable situation? Most crucially, are international donors prepared to support reconstruction efforts in Gaza if it remains an ongoing war zone?

Addressing these questions is crucial for developing an effective approach to reconstruction in Gaza, although it would require a paradigm shift in how we think about post-war rebuilding, potentially necessitating new models of humanitarian aid and development that can function within a context of ongoing instability.

WITHIN WHAT INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK WOULD RECONSTRUCTION UNFOLD?

Another challenge to reconstruction in Gaza is the uncertainty surrounding governance structures after the war. Effective reconstruction requires a broader political and institutional framework with clearly defined governance mechanisms. This raises several questions. Within what institutional and political framework will reconstruction occur? What will the governance structure in Gaza look like in the future? While different proposals for governing Gaza (independently from the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory) have been put forward – governance by regional powers, a multinational force, local families, exiled politicians or the Palestinian Authority – Gaza's future institutional landscape remains highly uncertain. This uncertainty leads to a more pressing concern: what if Gaza lacks functional governance entirely? How would this affect reconstruction? The absence of clarity in this area could significantly complicate reconstruction efforts, potentially undermining their effectiveness and their ability to meet the urgent needs of the population.

WHO WILL PAY FOR RECONSTRUCTION?

As already mentioned, UNDP has estimated that Gaza's reconstruction could cost US\$ 50 billion. This raises a key question. Who will fund this enormous undertaking? In principle, Israel and the United States (complicit in this war) should be held accountable and pay reparations for the devastation of the Gaza Strip. However, realistically, other nations, especially GCC countries, will be expected to bear the financial burden. The problem with previous reconstruction efforts (for example, following the 2014 war), is that GCC countries failed to fulfil their pledges, and the international community has become increasingly sceptical about the impact of their investments, given Israel's repeated destruction of funded projects. This pattern thus emphasises the need for reconstruction to go hand in hand with diplomatic pressure to reach a lasting political solution that upholds Palestinian rights and ensures that the funds disbursed by donor countries do not go to waste in future wars launched on Gaza.

4

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Given the ongoing war and the various challenges outlined above, the reconstruction of Gaza will undoubtedly be a very complex and non-linear process, fraught with uncertainties. Nonetheless, looking forward, it is crucial to identify key pillars that should guide a future reconstruction strategy, drawing on lessons learned from the past. This paper highlights four essential elements that, while not exhaustive, are critical to shaping a more effective and sustainable approach to reconstruction.

REDEFINING RECONSTRUCTION AS A MULTI-FACETED PROCESS

In the Gaza context, the prevailing approach to reconstruction has been largely one-dimensional, focused on physical rebuilding (rebuilding infrastructure, schools, health clinics, houses, water pipes and so on), while overlooking three other equally important aspects. It is thus urgent to revisit the predominant approach to reconstruction, learn from previous efforts and view reconstruction as a multi-dimensional process encompassing physical, political, economic and societal aspects.

The political dimension is of prime importance. Past reconstruction efforts have made it clear that reconstruction cannot be reduced to a humanitarian or technical process. Without addressing the root causes of the problem, sustainable reconstruction and development remain unattainable. Any reconstruction plan should be tied to a larger political process that aims to end Israel's illegal blockade on the Gaza Strip and its occupation, while recognising Palestinian rights to self-determination, freedom and justice. In the absence of a political framework, reconstruction plans risk being reduced to temporary fixes, unlikely to secure donor support due to the prevailing sense of futility as many donors have become reluctant to fund reconstruction, knowing that their contributions may turn out to have been in vain as the result of a future war. Palestinian self-determination and freedom from siege and occupation are thus prerequisites for any real and impactful reconstruction in Gaza. Third parties, including the United States and the EU, have a legal obligation to ensure respect for international law and compel Israel to end its blockade and occupation in order to break the cycle of destruction and failed reconstruction that has characterised Gaza for the past two decades. In the short

run, the United States and EU countries should pressure Israel to declare a ceasefire by halting arms shipments, to ensure an end to hostilities and facilitate the beginning of humanitarian relief and reconstruction.

In the Palestinian context, reconstruction should also be linked to achieving reconciliation, maintaining law and order in the Gaza Strip, reunifying the Palestinian people, reconnecting Gaza with the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and rebuilding a new leadership model and an inclusive and accountable political system that represents Palestinians from all walks of life.

The economic dimension, closely interlinked with the political one, is equally important. Building a viable economy in Gaza is impossible if it remains under siege and isolated from the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the world, and if Palestinians lack sovereignty over their natural resources and borders.

The fourth dimension is the societal one, although it usually gets overlooked. A comprehensive strategy must be developed to address the mental health crisis and trauma affecting all Gazans. Steps should also be taken to counter the increasing atomisation of Palestinian society, both within Gaza and between Gaza and the rest of Palestine.

ENSURING LOCAL OWNERSHIP AND INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION

Gaza-based representatives must be at the centre of the institutional architecture of any future reconstruction process. A bottom-up, internally driven approach to reconstruction is essential to foster local ownership and agency, ensure alignment of reconstruction efforts with the local context and local needs (especially of vulnerable groups), uphold Gazans' right to self-determination, and take advantage of indigenous knowledge and experience from previous rounds of reconstruction.

The establishment of a diverse and inclusive Palestinian reconstruction committee would thus be crucial. The committee would be involved in shaping and designing reconstruction projects, working closely with international donor organisations and contributing actively to donor-led initiatives.

It would represent a broad spectrum of Palestinian interests, and would include stakeholders from Gaza, including think tanks, NGOs, municipalities, grassroot organisations, entrepreneurs and business associations, as well as other experts from Palestine and the diaspora. The committee would also include Palestinian Authority officials who are taking the lead on reconstruction in Gaza (for example, the Ministry of Planning) and representatives from the new governance structure in Gaza.

Palestinians in the diaspora can also play an important role in reconstruction through the following:

- a. advocacy and lobbying, by raising global awareness of Gaza's challenges and engaging policymakers and international organisations;
- b. financial support, by establishing trust funds which would provide a transparent and reliable mechanism to channel funds and resources to Gaza. Different trust funds can be created to meet different needs (such as health care, education or infrastructure). This would help ensure a centralised management of resources and foster Palestinian unity and collective action;
- c. sharing professional and technical expertise.

INTEGRATING MICRO-LEVEL STRATEGIES WITH MACRO-LEVEL PLANNING

A revised approach to reconstruction in Gaza would also require the integration of macro-level strategies with a micro-level approach. While large-scale infrastructure projects are essential, a granular perspective would focus on taking advantage of local niches and the unique needs of each community. By focusing on one group of neighbourhoods at a time, reconstruction would allow for tailored interventions that address the distinct socio-economic fabric of each area, while still being rooted in the needs and aspirations of communities.

PROMOTING FOOD PRODUCTION AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES

Given the extreme food insecurity in Gaza, it is of the utmost urgency to rebuild the food system and promote food production for local consumption. People should be given the tools needed to produce food for local consumption to avoid growing reliance on donor aid. Small-scale agricultural production must be revalued, and sustainable agricultural practices must be promoted, as part of a larger strategy to build a productive base for the economy and address the environmental disaster that is one consequence of Israel's ongoing war on the Strip.



5

CONCLUSION

This paper has critically examined past reconstruction strategies in the Gaza Strip, highlighting the key structural flaws of previous efforts. However, even when these shortcomings are addressed, reconstruction efforts this time around will have to grapple with unprecedented challenges, including the staggering scale of destruction, uncertainty about the war's end, lack of a governance structure, and significant financial and funding challenges. While the road ahead is fraught with difficulties, there is an opportunity to do reconstruction better this time and to do it once and for all. To achieve this, it is important to ensure an end to Israel's siege and occupation and address the various dimensions of reconstruction (political, economic, societal and physical). It would also be important to include Palestinians at the centre of the process, adopt a micro-level approach in parallel with macro-level planning, and rebuild critical systems such as food production. While challenging, this approach is critical to break the cycle of destruction and reconstruction in Gaza.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

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In this context, they do not regard the Gaza Strip as a separate entity, but as part of the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel since 1967. They also hold that all approaches, be they short or long term, should be compatible with the principle of Palestinian self-determination. The objective is to highlight key insights from Palestinian experiences and expertise and introduce them into the international debate. Papers cover aspects such as security arrangements, governance, the role of women and urban planning for recovery and reconstruction. They reflect the author's views only.

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