

PEACE AND SECURITY

RECONSTRUCTION GOVERNANCE – LESSONS LEARNED

Palestinian Perspectives on the
Reconstruction of Gaza

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Without a sustainable political and Israeli-Palestinian arrangement and Palestinian unity, reconstruction efforts in Gaza will be futile, as conflict and destruction are likely to recur.



A national-level, non-political institution is needed to lead and manage disaster-response and reconstruction efforts, with active involvement from civil society and local communities.



The current Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, de facto controlled by Israel, delays rebuilding. A new, more efficient system is needed to ensure rapid reconstruction and sustainable urban planning.

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Without a sustainable political solution for Gaza's future, reconstruction efforts will be futile, as conflict and destruction will recur. Gaza's reconstruction also hinges on overcoming the Palestinian political split, necessitating a unified agenda for establishing an independent and democratic state.



A national-level institution should lead disaster management and reconstruction efforts in Gaza. This entity should be technical, devoid of partisan agendas, and empowered by law, ensuring participation from civil society and local communities to enhance ownership and effectiveness.



The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) has significantly delayed reconstruction efforts, exacerbating Gaza's suffering. To expedite reconstruction, a new mechanism is needed that facilitates rapid entry of materials and heavy equipment, involving regional and international contractors to cope with the immense scale of devastation. Additionally, Gaza's reconstruction should focus on integrating resilience and sustainability into future urban planning and development.

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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and Security Affairs

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1

OPERATING CONTEXT

POLITICAL AND SECURITY CONTEXT

The Gaza Strip has been under Israeli occupation since 1967. Israel has maintained full control even after its physical withdrawal on 22 September 2005. After Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian elections, Israel imposed restrictions on Gaza. In autumn 2007, Israel enforced an illegal blockade. Since then, Gaza has experienced a series of assaults by Israel, resulting in significant devastation and loss of life. The political split among Palestinians since the last elections in 2006 has significantly complicated the situation, adding to people’s misery.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION BEFORE 7 OCTOBER 2023

Over recent years, the socio-economic situation in Gaza has deteriorated so much that the United Nations (UN) warned that it would cease to be liveable by 2020 (UN 2012). The main reasons were prolonged blockade, political split among Palestinians, and the huge devastation due to four wars and repetitive cycles of violence (2008, 2012, 2014 and 2021). These factors had a significant and negative impact on the lives of the people living in the Gaza Strip. The situation of the Gaza Strip before 7 October 2023, is summarised below (Besaiso 2023):

- The Gaza Strip was among the most densely populated regions in the world, with a population density of 6,101 persons per square kilometre, over ten times higher than the West Bank. In urban areas, the density surges to 13,789 people per square kilometre. Refugees made up 66.1 per cent of the Gaza Strip’s population.
- The situation in the Gaza Strip grew more complicated due to continuous population growth, rapid resource depletion, lack of control over resources, a longstanding 17-year blockade and division, and extensive Israeli control over daily life. As a result, the UN projected that the Gaza Strip would be unliveable by 2020, and that Gaza had been going from bad to worse in a trajectory of misery.
- All indicators of living conditions in the Gaza Strip were bleak, reflecting a state of misery, poverty and acute vulnerability. Poverty had increased from 40 per cent in 2005 to 56 per cent in 2020. The level of food insecurity had reached 64 per cent in Gaza compared with 9 per cent in the West Bank. On the other hand, the percentage of citizens classified as severely and extremely needy had reached 77 per cent in Gaza compared with 23 per cent in the West Bank. Those exposed to risks from conflict amounted to 60 per cent

Table 1
Reported impact snapshot | Gaza Strip (26 June 2024), OCHA

Aspect	
People	37,718 Palestinian fatalities, 885,523 injured, 10,000 reported missing or under the rubble, 1.7 million internally displaced persons (75 per cent of Gaza), 1 million people projected to face catastrophic levels of food insecurity (IPC Phase 5)
Damage	>60 per cent of residential buildings, >80 per cent of commercial facilities, 155 health facilities, 188 UNRWA installations, 130 ambulances
Education	~625,000 students with no access to education, > 7,556 students and 383 educational staff killed, 88 per cent of all school buildings (497 out of 563) sustained some level of damage, including 54 per cent directly hit, 69 per cent of school buildings used as IDP shelters were directly hit or damaged.

Source: OCHA (2024)

in Gaza and 40 per cent in the West Bank. Moreover, 80 per cent of Gaza's population relied on external assistance, but even that gradually being reduced because donors were shifting their focus to more pressing areas, such as Yemen, Libya, Syria and, more recently, Ukraine (Besaiso 2023).

- The World Bank's study on Palestinian mental health highlighted the dire impact of Gaza's harsh living conditions, frequent conflicts and suffocating blockade on its residents' mental well-being. The study revealed that 71 per cent of Gaza's adults suffered from depression and 65 per cent had experienced traumatic events. Economic disempowerment and loss of agency also contributed to psychological stress, particularly affecting young people (World Bank 2023).

IMPACT OF WAR ON GAZA (7 OCTOBER 2023)

Undoubtedly, the ongoing conflict has led to widespread devastation across all aspects of life in the Gaza Strip. Table 1 (see p. 2) presents the findings of the OCHA report (26 June 2024, Day 264) (OCHA 2024).

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GOVERNANCE OF GAZA RECONSTRUCTION AFTER 2014 WAR

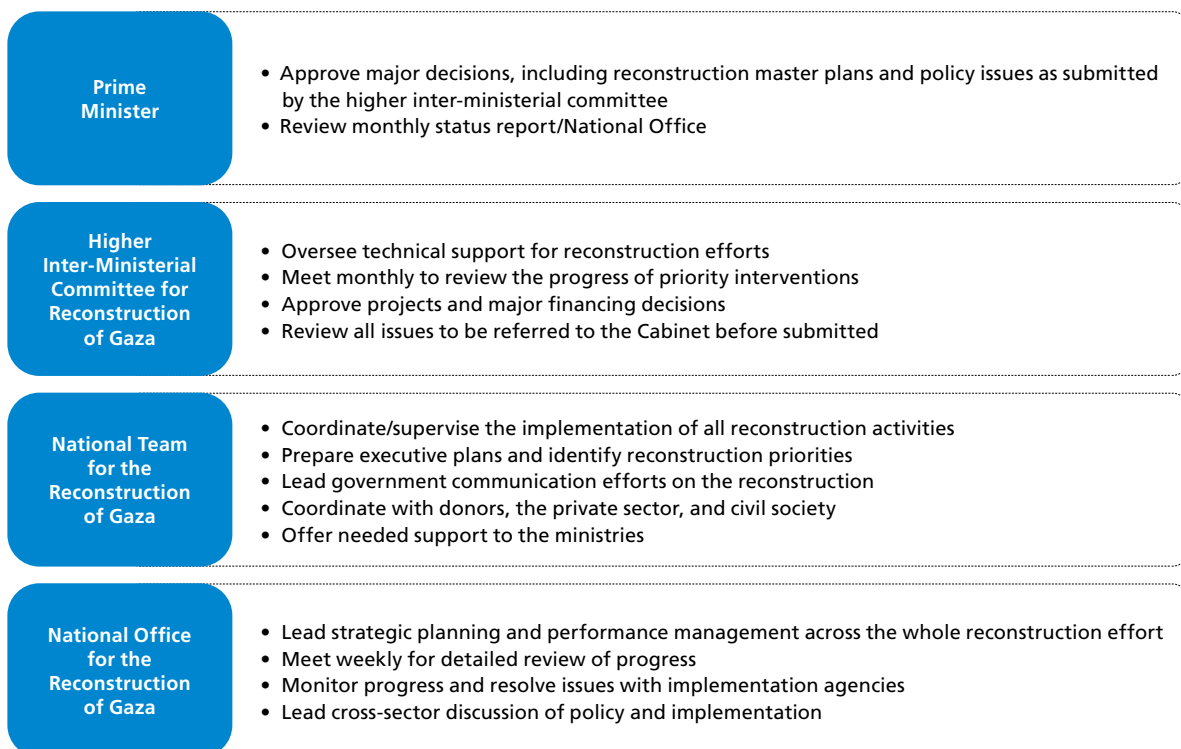
Following the war in Gaza in 2014, which was believed at that time to be the most devastating war since Nakba 1948, the donors formed a tripartite group consisting of the United Nations, the European Union and the World Bank. Donors who had invested heavily in reconstruction following the wars in 2008/2009 and 2012 realised that the conflict in Gaza would continue in the absence of a sustainable political solution and stressed the importance of institutionalising the reconstruction process and ensuring local ownership by empowering the Palestinian Authority to assume responsibility towards Gaza reconstruction.

The governance of Gaza reconstruction after the 2014 war included the following setup (see Figure 1), approved by the Palestinian Authority (Prime Minister Office 2015).

On 30 July 2014, the Cabinet formed the *Higher Inter-Ministerial Committee for the Recovery and Reconstruction of Gaza*, chaired by then Deputy Prime Minister Mohammed Mustafa, who resigned in April 2015 leaving the Prime Minister the head of this committee.

On 21 October 2014, the Palestinian Consensus Government formed the National Team for the Reconstruction of Gaza (resolution number R.H/M.W/17/21/06), under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister’s Office. The role of the National Team was not to drive implementation, but rather to act as a liaison and coordination point and to track and monitor the work being done across the various ministries. The key functions of NORG as designed were: (i) prioritisation and planning, (ii) policy guidelines, (iii) implementa-

Figure 1
Setup of the governance of Gaza reconstruction, approved by the Palestinian Authority (Prime Minister Office 2015)



Source: Prime Minister Office 2015

tion support, (iv) performance management, (v) coordination, (vi) financing and (vii) communication.

The National Team was composed of senior representatives from the PA ministries. To facilitate implementation, the National Office for Gaza Reconstruction (NORG) was established with full-time staff, operating under the direct supervision of the National Team. NORG received generous support from donors, mainly UNDP, UNOPS, the World Bank and Kuwait.

Unfortunately, in practice, NORG did not fulfil its complete mandate and the Palestinian Authority did not seem keen to empower it. Moreover, NORG lacked adequate resources. Although it was initially planned to have 30 staff members, it started with just five senior staff, which over the years fell to only three engineers. The donors, the World Bank and UNOPS funded the development and running of a robust online platform to help monitor the reconstruction activities and generate reports for the government and donors. Due to a lack of resources, however, the database was not updated regularly and eventually became obsolete. As a result, the NORG reports became unreliable and were no longer utilised by donors, who subsequently stopped supporting the platform.

Consequently, donors ceased their support, and the Palestinian Authority further diminished its backing of NORG. As a result, in 2019 NORG was downgraded from the Prime Minister's Office to a small unit under the Ministry of Housing and Public Works in Ramallah.

In the Gaza Strip, the de facto authorities have been active in Gaza reconstruction and formed a *High Committee for Gaza Reconstruction* under the leadership of the Gaza Ministry of Public Works and Housing (MoPWH). Following each assault on Gaza, the committee conducted several damage assessments, as well as early recovery and reconstruction plans.

Donors also developed their own reconstruction plans, besides those developed by the PA and the de facto authorities in Gaza. This created confusion because of the absence of a central authority to govern the reconstruction process. Furthermore, donors found themselves caught between the Palestinian Authority and the de facto authorities, coordinating with the PA at the strategic and policy levels while needing to acknowledge the role of the de facto authorities during implementation. Ironically, the Minister of MoPWH in the previous (eighteenth) Palestinian government, sent formal letters to donors instructing them not to engage with the de facto authorities, but the donors disregarded these instructions. This is an example of the chaos plaguing the governance of Gaza reconstruction due to the Palestinian political split that hindered the reconstruction efforts.

3

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

POLITICAL ASPECT

ABSENCE OF A SUSTAINABLE POLITICAL SOLUTION

Without a sustainable political solution for Gaza's future, all reconstruction efforts will be in vain, as destruction will recur. Israel must recognise the rights of the people of Gaza to live in peace and prosperity, lift the blockade and end the occupation.

END OF THE PALESTINIAN POLITICAL SPLIT

Palestinians must resolve the political division that has negatively affected Gaza and the entire nation. No single Palestinian faction can govern alone. They must learn to embrace each other and develop a unified political agenda aimed at establishing an independent and democratic state.

DECISIONS ON WAR AND PEACE

Palestinian factions need to understand that peace is invaluable, while war is extremely costly. The decision between war and peace should be institutionalised and made at the national level. War is not a matter to be decided based on the individual interests of certain factions without national consensus.

GOVERNANCE ASPECT

INSTITUTIONALISING RECONSTRUCTION

As Gaza has been subjected to a series of assaults, which unfortunately may continue with the Israeli occupation and political stalemate, it is vital to create a sustainable local institution to lead interventions during the preparedness, response, early recovery and reconstruction phases. Given that the West Bank also experiences frequent assaults and destruction under the occupation, there is a pressing need for a country-level institution to manage disasters and reconstruction. This national entity should be formed and

managed based on technical considerations, avoiding political agendas that may hinder its work. This entity could fall under the President of Palestine or the Prime Minister's Office and be held accountable to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) after the latter's re-activation. This entity should be empowered by law and have the financial support and technical assistance it needs.

Nonetheless, in the absence of a unified government and with the continuation of the political split among Palestinians, the Palestinian civil society organisations and private sector institutions shall be empowered to play a role in the reconstruction efforts. Donors, PA and the de facto authorities should accept the role of civil society and private sector organisations.

PARTICIPATION AND LOCAL OWNERSHIP

NORG was initially composed solely of government ministry representatives. To enhance local ownership, key non-governmental actors such as prominent civil society organisations and private sector institutions should participate actively in the reconstruction efforts within sustainable governance and not on an ad hoc basis.

ENGAGEMENT OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Grassroots organisations have better and faster access to local communities than the government. Creating local community emergency committees is essential. These committees should receive training and be empowered.

VOLUNTEERING

Promote a spirit of volunteerism, particularly among young men and women, to engage in disaster and emergency response efforts. Civic education and principles of good citizenship should be integrated into the school curriculum. University students should have to complete a number of mandatory volunteer hours before graduation. Some universities have such conditions in their academic system but they are not enforced.

GAZA RECONSTRUCTION MECHANISM (GRM)

The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) is a temporary agreement between the Palestinian Government and the Government of Israel brokered by the UN in September 2014 that granted Israel full control of the construction and reconstruction of Gaza. According to the agreement, Israel has full authority to approve or reject reconstruction projects, as well as the types and quantities of construction materials, and to approve vendors, suppliers and contractors. Additionally, Israel has the right to approve or deny the list of individuals eligible for housing reconstruction.

Ironically, the GRM agreement has formalised and legitimised the blockade, which entails extensive control over the entry of materials.

The GRM significantly delayed Gaza's reconstruction, which exacerbated people's suffering. For instance, in 2016 it took Israel an average of 207 days to approve a project (NORG 2017). Moreover, the GRM provided Israel with detailed intelligence information utilised during the ongoing conflict. For each housing unit to be reconstructed, owners are required to provide the GPS location of the house and detailed floor plans.

Over time, all key actors, including donors, recognised that using the GRM made Gaza's reconstruction impossible. On 14 February 2018, Mr Mladenov (who was the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process at the time) met with the Palestinian Prime Minister and Israel, and they all agreed to review the GRM (UNSCO 2018). Unfortunately, nothing really changed. Nonetheless, in March 2019, the UN announced an improvement to the GRM (OCHA 2019) to facilitate the implementation of humanitarian and development projects by expanding the number of contractors and businesses allowed to import materials; providing increased access for donors to monitor their projects; adopting clear deadlines for approving projects; clarifying procedures for import of dual-use items; and other technical adjustments to make the mechanism more user-friendly and help stimulate economic activity. This improvement arrived quite late, occurring five years after the 2014 war, and after reconstruction activities had significantly decreased.

In summary, Gaza's reconstruction requires a mechanism that speeds up construction and facilitates the entry of building materials and heavy equipment.

CAPACITY OF LOCAL CONTRACTORS

The devastation in Gaza is immense, and reconstruction exceeds the capacity of local contractors who, despite their technical expertise, lack the necessary heavy equipment and financial resources. To expedite the process, it is essential to involve regional and international construction companies.

According to a recent report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP 2024), the estimated amount of rubble is 39 million tonnes and the disposal of all rubble using the available resources may take 15 years.¹ The number of available trucks in Gaza before 7 October 2023 was limited to 105 as Israel imposed restrictions of the entry of trucks and heavy equipment. Many of these trucks were damaged during the ongoing war.

This shows the need to allow the entry of heavy construction equipment to facilitate reconstruction activities.

BUILDING FORWARD BETTER

The reconstruction of Gaza should embrace the principle of 'building forward better', focusing on post-crisis recovery to enhance resilience and sustainability. This involves integrating lessons learned to sustain infrastructure, systems and communities against future shocks, promoting inclusivity and ensuring recovery efforts support long-term sustainable development.

Thousands of homes in Gaza are classified as sub-standard, made of temporary structures in slum areas. Reconstruction should aim to improve these destroyed houses.

OPPORTUNITY FOR REPLANNING

The Urban Master Plan of the Gaza Strip is outdated, and without proper law enforcement, the municipality cannot enforce building codes, resulting in chaotic urban settings. The huge devastation suffered by infrastructure and buildings provides an opportunity for modern urban planning, catering to people's needs.

¹ Based on the assumption that 105 trucks (12 m³/19-tonne capacity) would be available for hauling the debris and operating in 8 hours shifts, 30 days a month.

4

THE WAY FORWARD

IDEAL SCENARIO

The ideal scenario would be an active and empowered central Palestinian government overseeing both the West Bank and Gaza, along with a functioning Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). In this situation, decisions on peace and war are made within Palestinian institutions: the Executive Branch (President and Prime Minister), the Legislative Branch (PLC), and in consultation with key political leaders.

The proposed structure involves a central ‘Palestinian National Disaster Management Commission’ (PNDMC) that covers the Gaza Strip and West Bank, as both are prone to disaster. This entity would be permanent and function in collaboration with existing structures. In many countries,² such a commission falls under the Ministry of the Interior, while in others³ it falls under the Prime Minister’s Office. The role and mandate of this commission shall be stipulated in a Presidential Decree. The PNDMC can play a crucial role in preparing for, responding to and recovering from disasters at the national level. The specific tasks of such a commission would be policy formulation; strategic plan-

ning; coordination between various government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other stakeholders; monitoring and evaluation; public awareness; resource mobilisation, as well as drafting of legislation and regulations related to disaster management. The PNDMC serves as the central authority for disaster management and should drive the National Commission for Gaza Reconstruction (NCGR) by focusing on these areas to respond effectively to disasters, minimising their impact and aiding a quicker recovery.

MOST-LIKELY SCENARIO

Unfortunately, the Palestinian political stalemate is expected to persist, along with the political division among Palestinians. In the short term, it is unlikely that this split will be resolved and lead to a unified government capable of overseeing Gaza’s reconstruction. The PA, as a legitimate recognised Palestinian body, insists on having the leadership of Gaza reconstruction, while the de facto authorities in Gaza insist on having a role in the reconstruction alongside other stakeholders. Indeed, relief and reconstruction after disasters are time-sensitive, and we do not have the luxury of time to bring the Palestinian factions to the negotiating table, as the victims of the war cannot wait.

² USA, Turkey, India, Australia, and so on.
³ Jordan, Egypt, UK, and so on.

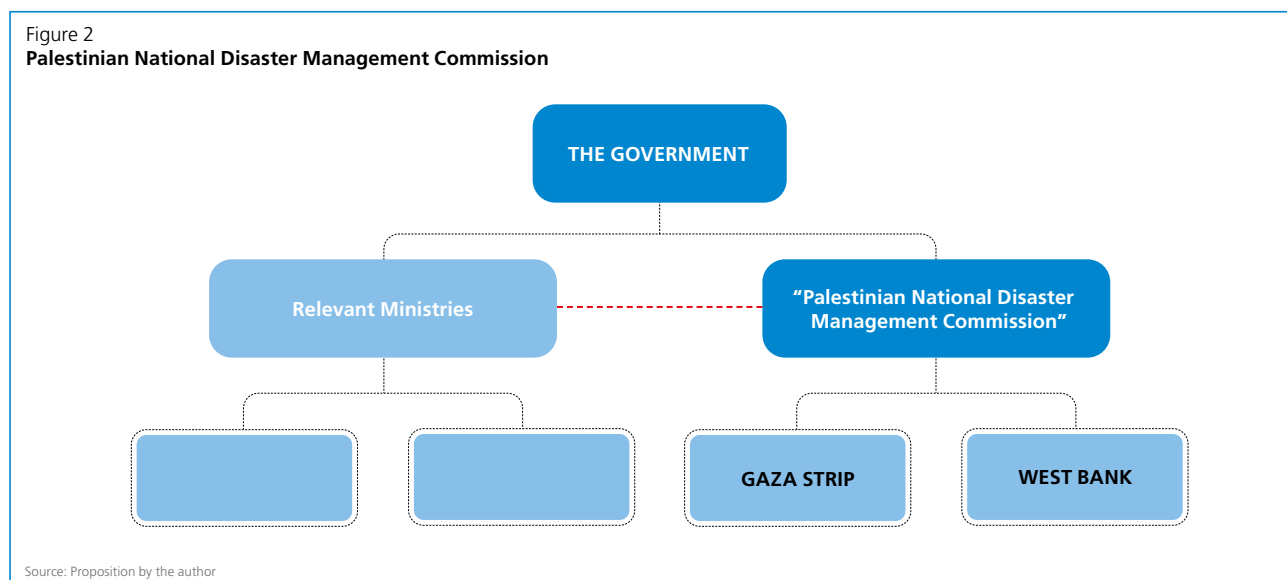
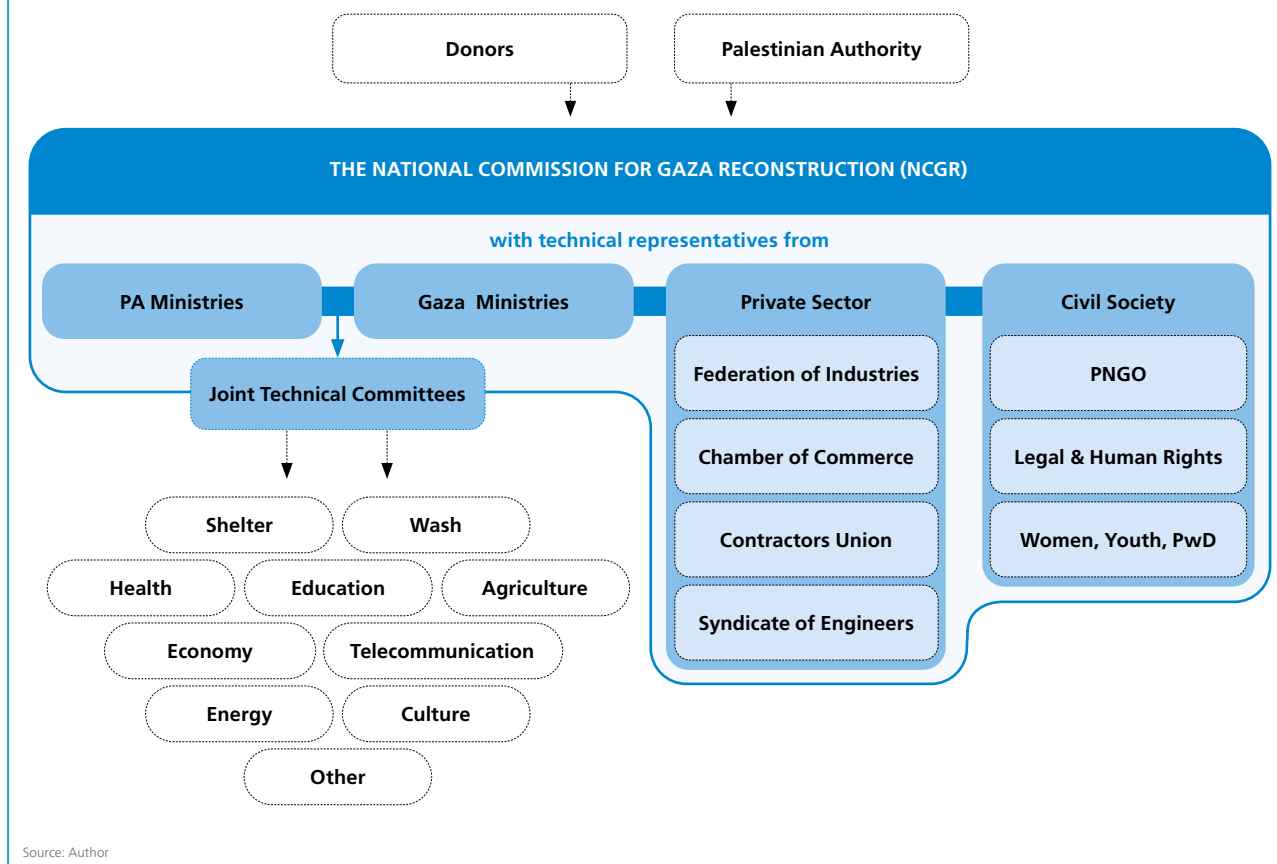


Figure 3
Proposed governance structure of Gaza reconstruction



Source: Author

To date, the PA has not announced the governance structure, which is typically released after consulting with donors at the end of the war.

This complex situation compels us to provide more autonomy to the technical level, to lead reconstruction efforts and to enhance the role of the private sector and civil society. The Palestinian political level and factions should step back to prevent any political complications that might hinder the technical level from proceeding with reconstruction activities that will deepen people's suffering. It is a matter of saving lives, in pursuit of which we expect more flexibility from the political level.

The proposed structure is explained below:

- The National Commission for Gaza Reconstruction (NCGR) is an independent technical entity in charge of Gaza reconstruction in collaboration with key stakeholders and existing technical levels in the relevant ministries in Gaza and the West Bank.
- Because the PA is the only government body recognised by the international community, the Commission shall be under the jurisdiction of the PA.
- The NCGR will directly coordinate with donors and the PA, which should demonstrate some flexibility to enable the technical entity to operate effectively.
- The NCGR shall have technical representatives from PA ministries, Gaza ministries, the private sector and civil society organisations.
- The technical expertise within Gaza's ministries has accumulated valuable experience in managing Gaza's reconstruction efforts during previous conflicts, particularly the MoPWH, which possesses institutional memory and a detailed database and has become the reference for all donors.
- The private sector shall include representatives from key institutions related to reconstruction, that is, the Federation of Industries, the Chamber of Commerce, the Contractors Union, and the Syndicate of Engineers.
- Civil society should be represented by umbrella organisations such as PNGO, along with groups focusing on legal and human rights, women, young people and people with disabilities.
- At the technical level, the structure should include joint technical committees comprising ministries from the Palestinian Authority, ministries from Gaza, and donor representatives.

The proposed structure is shown in Figure 3.

COMMUNITY-BASED EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Following the 2014 war, it became evident that the role of local communities before, during and after disasters is crucial. The author of this paper has developed a Community-Based Emergency Preparedness Plan (Besaiso 2016) that covers 15 high-risk communities. The plan involved establishing a total of 21 Emergency Response Committees (ERCs): 15 committees at the community level, five at the governorate level, and one at the central level. The author also provided training to the committee members and volunteers. These committees will be under the supervision of the NCGR, aiming to enhance accessibility for local communities and ensure their participation.

STRUCTURE OF LOCAL COMMUNITY COMMITTEES

The participation of the local community is structured in three levels in a bottom-up approach:

- (a) Community committees involving local actors and volunteers.
- (b) Governorate committees (a total of five) representing the community committees.
- (c) A central committee representing the five governorate committees.



5

CONCLUSION

The approach taken to the governance of reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip should take into account lessons learned from the institutional set-up established after the 2014 war and the problems related to the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism. It must also be realistic with regard to the ongoing intra-Palestinian split. This paper therefore proposes a structure that would include not only the technical levels of the relevant ministries in Gaza and the West Bank but also civil society and the private sector and closely coordinate its activities with local committees on the ground.

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Mamoun Besaiso is a senior consultant who has been involved in many crisis and post-conflict interventions in the Gaza Strip, Libya and Iraq. In Palestine, he conducted Damage Assessments in five wars (2009, 2012, 2014, 2021 and 2024) and participated in developing the Early Recovery Plans. He has also developed Emergency Preparedness Plans for 15 local communities in Gaza. He has led numerous interventions in conflict-prone areas across different sectors.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

»Palestinian Perspectives on the Reconstruction of Gaza« is a joint project carried out by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. The papers published within the framework of this project focus on Palestinian needs and priorities with regard to a range of topics linked to early recovery and reconstruction of Gaza after the 2023/2024 war.

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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