

Hamas' View of the October 7 War

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Executive Summary

Military conditions are being set in the Gaza Strip that could lead to the defeat of Hamas, but these conditions will fail to achieve an enduring end to the war without a political solution. The military defeat of Hamas is an essential precondition for the establishment of a new government in Gaza that will be willing and able to make and keep an enduring peace. Defeat is a temporary military effect, however. Israel must cement Hamas' defeat by setting a clear and obtainable political endstate for this war, and the US and its regional partners must also recognize that a ceasefire in the current conditions will virtually ensure the renewal of Hamas attacks on Israel and future major war in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas initiated a war on October 7, 2023, that it believes is one step towards destroying the Israeli state. Hamas does not seek to create an independent Gazan state or an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Hamas sees its political control of the Gaza Strip as one step towards its ultimate goal of controlling all of Israeli territory. Hamas, if it survives this war, will prepare to initiate the next war against the Israeli state. Hamas and its allies in Iran's Axis of Resistance (AoR) are learning new lessons that they will likely incorporate into their operations in future wars aimed at Israel's destruction.

Hamas' long-term effort to embed itself in Palestinian society and politics makes defeating and replacing it very difficult, but not impossible. Hamas' combination of social services and outreach with coercive measures have ensured that Hamas retains significant support in Gaza relative to the very limited number of other entities that could replace it, despite the extremely destructive war that Hamas initiated. Hamas' coercive apparatus makes it extremely difficult for possible Hamas alternatives in the Gaza Strip to begin to build their own governance system because to do so while Hamas remains militarily active risks near-certain death. It is not impossible to destroy Hamas' political and military system, but doing so will require Hamas' military defeat and a long transition to a new Palestinian-led government in the Gaza Strip.

Support from Iran and its regional allies and proxies combined with Hamas' internal

development enabled the October 7 attacks. This combination will likely drive future Hamas attacks on Israel. Several key Hamas leaders, notably Hamas leader in Gaza Yahya Sinwar and Hamas Gaza military commander Mohammad Deif, helped the group develop its offensive doctrine and key military infrastructure—including tunnels—that enabled both the October 7 attacks and the subsequent defensive campaign against the Israeli ground operation. Iran and its regional allies and proxies provided more advanced weapons and probably helped Hamas develop the plans that would form the basis for the October 7 attacks.

Hamas will likely survive this war in an extremely weak position, but it could acquire the requisite resources to rebuild itself unless Israel sets both military and political conditions to prevent Hamas' reconstitution. Israel and its partners should exploit Hamas' current weakness by building a new political authority in the Gaza Strip that can replace Hamas. Militarily defeating Hamas is a requirement for replacing the group's political control in the Gaza Strip. Hamas has attempted to reconstitute itself during the war both by reorganizing its forces and recruiting new fighters and by building new but rudimentary weapons. This reconstitution effort will accelerate as the war ends and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) leaves the Strip, unless Israel or another capable entity can interdict Hamas resupply from abroad. The IDF has severely degraded Hamas, but Hamas' remnants can still kill and threaten any alternative political authority that seeks to replace Hamas' control.

Israel and its international partners, including the United States, should maintain the current course in order to defeat Hamas militarily while simultaneously preparing to create an external security force to protect a new Palestinian-led authority and to prevent Hamas from reconstituting. Israel and its partners cannot introduce a new government without protecting it or defeating Hamas, and the establishment and consolidation of a new government will take considerable time. An external security force will probably not agree to conduct major operations on Israel's behalf, but the external force will be needed to continue to suppress Hamas remnants as Israel and its partners transition control to the

new governing authority. Israel may need to retain the freedom to conduct operations to continue targeting Hamas, depending on whether Israel can generate support for an external security force, the quality of such external forces, and their rules of engagement. Finally, Israel and its partners will need to install an inspections regime along the Rafah border to ensure that Hamas cannot be resupplied either through a border crossing or by smugglers.

There will be no permanent peace while Hamas remains a surviving political and military entity. No ceasefire that ends this war without setting conditions to prevent Hamas' reconstitution will preclude Hamas from launching a new war in the future. Hamas sees any ceasefire as an interim truce that the group can use to prepare for the next round of fighting that its leaders will initiate for reasons and at a time of their choosing. Hamas will not end its multigenerational war to destroy the Israeli state until it is compelled to do so. Failure to defeat Hamas in this war condemns Israel and its partners—including the United States—to planning to fight a future war against Hamas, which will again be backed by Iran. Iran and its allies and proxies may support Hamas more aggressively in a future war, including by launching ground attacks from Lebanon, the West Bank, or the Golan Heights. Defeating Hamas in this war means that Israel will have removed one pressure point from which Iran and its partners can threaten Israel's existence.

This paper describes Hamas' aims on October 7 and the reality that a failure to destroy Hamas militarily will prevent a sustainable peace. The paper does not attempt to evaluate the legality of the behavior of either side in this war. It also is not attempting to ascribe blame to any particular actor for the activities of either side. It specifically does not seek to assign praise or blame for the success or failure of IDF activities. Multiple domestic Israeli and international factors have informed Israeli decisionmaking at every level of war, and this paper does not attempt to disentangle them. The purpose of this paper is rather to understand Hamas' decisionmaking throughout the war and how it seeks to shape the postwar environment to its benefit.

Introduction

Harakat al Muqawama al Islamiya (The Islamic Resistance Movement), or Hamas, is an Islamist political and military organization that seeks to destroy Israel and replace it with a Palestinian Islamic state.¹ Hamas launched the first attack of a new phase in its multigenerational war to destroy the Israeli state on October 7, 2023. Hamas intends to control all of Israeli territory at the end of this war, thus destroying the Israeli state, however unattainable that intention may prove in reality. Hamas' survival as a military and political entity after this war would likely preclude a sustainable peace, because any ceasefire that ends this war will be temporary. Leaving Hamas' military entity with significant military capabilities or the ability to reconstitute itself whenever the fighting ends will enable Hamas to launch future wars against the Israeli state.

Hamas is an outgrowth of the Muslim Brotherhood that defines itself as a "Palestinian national liberation and resistance movement" intent on establishing an Islamic Palestinian state that stretches "from the River Jordan... to the Mediterranean and from Ras al Naqurah [Israel's northern border with Lebanon]...to Umm al Rashrash [Eilat—Israel's southernmost city]," which includes all of Israel's territory.² A Brotherhood-influenced Islamist and his followers founded the group in the late 1980s.³ These followers included men like Yahya Sinwar, who today leads Hamas in its war against Israel.⁴ Hamas began operations in the Gaza Strip targeting Israeli forces in 1989 when it kidnapped an Israeli paratrooper.⁵ The early Hamas militias lacked the sophistication and organizational structure that defined the group's military wing, the Izz al Din al Qassem Brigades, prior to the October 7 War.⁶ These early cells had few weapons, conducted rudimentary hit-and-run attacks, and assassinated Palestinian political opponents.⁷

The grassroots approach that Hamas took to building support among Gazans in the 1980s and 1990s forms the basis of Hamas' local strength in the Gaza Strip today. Hamas relied on the provision of social services and a reputation for honesty relative to the then-dominant Fatah and Fatah-controlled Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to catapult it to relevancy.⁸

These services helped Hamas build support among the impoverished Palestinians who lived in the Gaza Strip's refugee camps.⁹ Hamas gradually imposed its conservative mores on Gazan society through violent coercion as well as by trading on its reputation for honesty and provision of social services.¹⁰ This approach mirrors the approach of Lebanese Hezbollah, which similarly used social services and a reputation of relative honesty to build support before using violence against the local population to maintain that support.

Israel's decisions contributed to Hamas' ability to undermine and then replace Fatah and the Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip. Israel sought to encourage the pre-Hamas Islamist movement in the Gaza Strip beginning as early as the 1970s to "weaken" the PLO.¹¹ Both pro-PLO figures and some Israeli officials say today that Israel turned a blind eye to Hamas' activities as part of this larger effort.¹² Israel did not "arm or actively encourage" Hamas and other Islamists to attack and undermine Fatah and the PLO.¹³ Israeli governments did view Hamas and the Islamists "as a useful tool to use against secular nationalists in the PLO," however.¹⁴ These Israeli positions and Fatah's incompetence helped to weaken Fatah and the PLO throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Hamas' growing strength culminated in Hamas' eventual takeover in the Strip in 2007.

Hamas took full control of the Strip in 2007 after repeated disagreements between itself and Fatah. Fatah's and the PLO's split with Hamas came after years of tension.¹⁵ The PLO had "immediately" seen Hamas as a "rival threatening [the PLO's and Fatah's] hitherto unchallenged leadership in Palestinian politics."¹⁶ Fatah supporters dominated the ranks of the Palestinian Authority security forces in the Gaza Strip after the 2006 election. Hamas therefore developed its own paramilitary security force to augment Hamas' military wing.¹⁷ Hamas claimed that the Fatah-dominated security forces "collaborated" with the United States, Israel, and others to prepare Fatah forces for a "showdown" with Hamas' own paramilitaries.¹⁸ Hamas used its paramilitaries and military wing to drive Fatah from the Strip in 2007, thereby cementing the schism between the Ramallah-based, Fatah-led Palestinian Authority and the

Gaza City-based, Hamas-dominated Palestinian Authority.¹⁹

Hamas turned to violence against Gazans to expand its control over the Gaza Strip after 2007. Hamas prevented any threat to its continued control, whether that threat would come in elections or through a revolt. Hamas fighters executed Fatah supporters after the 2007 takeover, and the group raided Fatah offices and harassed Fatah activists.²⁰ Hamas violence against Gazans continued after 2007 as Hamas sought to eliminate any threat to its rule in the Strip. A Human Rights Watch report from 2018 detailed Hamas' violent suppression of political opponents in the Strip, which included the torture and indefinite detention of Gazans.²¹ Hamas uses its internal security apparatus to implement its campaign of violent suppression of Gazan "collaborators" and political opponents.²²

Hamas' success in embedding itself so deeply in Gazan society makes the group hard to destroy. Hamas differs from groups like al Qaeda in Iraq or the Islamic State because it established itself by providing relatively honest, relatively well-run social services at a time when the Fatah-dominated Gazan government was seen as hopelessly corrupt and mismanaged.²³ Al Qaeda and the Islamic State did not provide serious social services as they sought power but instead coerced support by brutally murdering opponents, a practice that eventually resulted in a loss of support and the rise of alternative Sunni movements. Hamas did not initially coerce the population into supporting it—though coercion was one tool it later used against its opponents or dissidents.²⁴ Hamas' victories in municipal and then Palestinian Parliamentary elections in the early 2000s provided evidence that Hamas' approach worked and was approved by many Palestinians at the time. Many lauded the 2006 Palestinian elections as free and fair, including the George W. Bush Administration.²⁵

This paper focuses on Hamas' aims on October 7 and the reality that a failure to destroy Hamas militarily will prevent a sustainable peace. The paper explores how Hamas has retained and why it will likely retain significant military capabilities and the ability to reconstitute after the fighting ends by providing a description of the military and operational conduct of the war as Hamas fought it. The paper does not attempt to evaluate the

legality of the behavior of either side in this war. It also is not attempting to ascribe blame to any particular actor for the activities of either side. It specifically does not seek to assign praise or blame for the success or failure of IDF activities. Multiple domestic Israeli and international factors have informed Israeli decisionmaking at every level of war, and this paper does not attempt to disentangle them. The purpose of this paper is rather to understand Hamas' decisionmaking throughout the war and how it has charted a pathway to its survival.

Hamas' Enduring Dominance of the Palestinian Scene

Hamas' military and political strength in the Gaza Strip and its popularity in the West Bank relative to Fatah mean that Hamas is still the dominant party in Palestinian politics and replacing it with any entity will require a lengthy transitional period. The United States and Israel have each put forward vague concepts about the post-war Gaza Strip throughout the war. The United States seeks to use a reformed Palestinian Authority to govern the Strip, a proposal Israel has rejected. Israel has experimented with various ideas, including using large Gazan families or a vaguely-described local authority to govern the Strip. Neither of these approaches can succeed without defeating Hamas militarily, and both would require a lengthy transitional period to ensure that Hamas remnants do not subvert or capture the new authority.

Hamas' deep infiltration of Gazan society and its political strength are reflected in the support it still receives from Gazan Palestinians. There are no realistic alternatives for Gazan Palestinians to offer their support to, of course. The "support" for Hamas is derived in large part from the reality that Hamas has killed off or marginalized its competition. Regardless, the comparative lack of support for alternatives to Hamas illustrates that new institutions would require significant external support during a transition to maintain control

of the Strip. Fifty-nine percent of all Palestinians and 52% of Gazans prefer that Hamas continue governing the Strip, compared to only 25% of all Palestinians and 28% of Gazans preferring a new, elected Palestinian Authority, according to a Palestinian poll conducted in late May 2024.²⁶ The same poll found that only 9% of Gazans prefer the return of the Palestinian Authority under Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, and only 4% of Gazans prefer control of the Strip passing to tribes and large families or a new, Israeli-established authority.²⁷ Hamas' political strength is derived from both its grassroots approach and its coercive apparatus. Its grassroots approach allowed it to initially build momentum, and its coercive apparatus killed off alternatives or threats after Hamas cemented its control. Defeating its military wing and severely damaging its governing apparatus would severely undermine its political standing.

Hamas' military forces are severely degraded and nearing defeat as of September 2024. This does not mean these forces are destroyed or that there are no isolated Hamas fighter cells. Hamas' rocket stockpile is dwindling, which is preventing Hamas from imposing costs on the Israeli civilian population. The Israeli defense minister released a captured Hamas document on September 11 that showed that the Khan Younis Brigade had suffered 75% casualties between killed, wounded, or otherwise unfit for duty. The same brigade had also lost over 60% of its small arms and between 65 and 70% of its anti-tank rockets and missiles. This level of attrition, combined with the lack of serious resistance to Israeli incursions in Khan Younis in recent months, is consistent with a defeated military force. Hamas units across the remainder of the Strip are probably also severely degraded, and these units have lost access to the tunnels that would enable their resupply. New fighters cannot replace the dead or unfit, because these fighters require training. Training requires safe zones that do not exist in the Gaza Strip, which is under the watchful eye of the IDF Air Force. Surviving Hamas fighters can reorganize into small guerrilla cells

and stymie some Israeli efforts, however, especially if Israel attempts to transition the Strip to a new governing authority. A new governing authority would be forced to hunt down and eliminate Hamas remnants and training areas while still organizing itself unless Israeli forces or an external partner took on Hamas themselves. These ideas will be explored further below.

Animosity towards Israel throughout the Strip makes many alternatives to Hamas reticent to support Israeli plans for the Strip after the war. The fighting between Hamas and Israel has caused severe devastation among Gazan infrastructure and the civilian population. More than 60% of Palestinians have lost a family member in the current war and 80,000 buildings in the Strip have been destroyed, for example.²⁸ Local Gazans will probably be reticent to support either Hamas or Israeli post-war plans, given the participation of both Israel and Hamas in the war. Some Gazans are already reportedly preventing Hamas from entering safe zones to prevent Hamas from using displaced persons within the zones as human shields. This demonstrates a weakening of Hamas' hold over the population, but it is also unlikely that the Gazan population will support an Israeli-designed post-war plan. Designing a successful transition to a post-war governing entity that does not include Hamas may require Israel to partner with regional powers such as the UAE that have less political and emotional baggage inside the Strip. Outsourcing the transition is fraught with risk for Israel, to be sure, and it may be extremely difficult to secure initial buy-in; but an alternative wherein Hamas gradually rebuilds strength in the Strip while an Israeli-backed government flounders would probably be much worse over the long term. Israel can opt for less-expansive objectives, however, including by interdicting Hamas supplies to contain Hamas and prevent its reconstitution.²⁹

The continued existence of Palestinian militias, including Hamas, throughout the Strip similarly makes many alternatives to Hamas cautious about supporting Israeli efforts, given the political weakness of secular and relatively moderate

groups, such as Fatah. Both Fatah and the major Gazan clans have remained uncommitted to any postwar plan as they attempt to hedge their bets and align with the winning side. Fatah's elites have joined a national unity government with Hamas, but all prior governments between Hamas and Fatah have failed.³⁰ Gazan clans have engaged directly with the Israelis to attempt to form an alternative to Hamas.³¹ These clans rejected further engagement with the IDF, however, after Hamas assassinated a notable who had discussed creating an alternative to Hamas with the IDF.³² Initial failures to find local alternatives to groups such as Hamas do not necessarily preclude future success in that endeavor, as the US found in Iraq. Iraqi groups and tribes tried and failed to resist al Qaeda in Iraq several times before obtaining American assistance and expelling AQI from much of its former heartland. But reversing such setbacks requires both perseverance and often a new approach.

The Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority is especially cautious about supporting Israeli efforts in the Strip, given its political weakness relative to Hamas in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Hamas and its allies have become stronger in the West Bank as a result of the war, with many former Fatah militia members defecting and joining Hamas or one of its allies, such as the Iranian-backed and closely Hamas-aligned Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).³³ A Fatah decision to—in effect—support Israel's war in the Gaza Strip against Hamas by agreeing to form a government to govern the Strip risks exacerbating the general impression among Gazans and West Bankers that the Palestinian Authority is just another tool for Israel to occupy the Palestinian Territories.

Hamas has a clear vision for the post-war Gaza Strip, but the severe degradation of its military wing and the cautious attitudes of both Fatah and the Gazan clans will limit its ability to realize this vision in the near-term. Hamas would need to rebuild its coercive apparatus to encourage the Gazan clans or Fatah to acquiesce to Hamas' designs in Gaza. Hamas has been outlining a

vision for the post-war Gaza Strip since at least December 2023, when former Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh said that Hamas was open to a national unity government including Hamas that would rule both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Both Russia and China have supported this effort by organizing Hamas-Fatah talks that sought to achieve "Palestinian unity." Hamas and Fatah agreed to form a unity government in July 2024 after Chinese mediation.³⁴ Hamas probably sought this unity government because it sees an opportunity to exploit this war and Hamas' relative popularity to expand its political control in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Hamas' post-war relevance and its ability to execute any post-war vision will depend entirely on its strength after the war and its ability to rebuild its losses. Both the Gazan clans—which have long fought Hamas—and Fatah, which sees Hamas as an existential threat, will not willingly ally themselves with a broken and defeated Hamas. Defeating Hamas would open the door for a transition to a new authority that would pose less of a threat to Israel. The transition to a new authority would not be a rapid or easy activity, however. Hamas' long campaign to embed itself in the Gaza Strip and introduce its violent teachings based on Israel's destruction means that any new authority will need to be continually supported and its leaders protected against those that sympathize with Hamas. Israeli partners would also need to deradicalize the Gazan education system to prevent a new generation of anti-Israeli Hamas-like sympathizers from growing up and attacking the Israeli state either as part of Hamas or within a new organization. Current and future Hamas sympathizers would likely organize militarily against a new authority absent such a transition.

An end to this war that fails to destroy Hamas or provides it space to rebuild risks allowing the group to return to prominence with Iranian assistance. Iran has helped to accelerate Hamas' development in the Gaza Strip, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force is attempting to strengthen Hamas in the West Bank.

Iran and its allies seek to destroy the Israeli state, and the October 7 War is teaching these groups new lessons about fighting Israel and its allies. Hamas and its leaders have repeatedly shown a willingness to learn new lessons about how to fight the Israelis on the local level. Hamas' survival would allow Iran and Hamas to claim victory and to set conditions for future attacks incorporating the lessons learned from October 7. These attacks could come from the Gaza Strip or elsewhere.

Hamas' Preparations for October 7 and Iran's Support for Ground Attacks into Israel

Hamas' development into the military organization that conducted the October 7 attacks was driven by both Hamas' own leaders and by its allies in Tehran. Hamas' leaders—in successive wars with Israel—learned tactical and strategic lessons that helped them build the military force that launched the October 7 attacks. These leaders could not have done this alone, however. Hamas leaders worked with the IRGC Quds Force and learned from Lebanese Hezbollah to perfect plans and acquire new, advanced weapons with which they could threaten Israel.³⁵ The Quds Force also assisted Hamas in building a military and political coalition of like-minded Palestinian militias bent on destroying Israel, multiplying Hamas' combat power. Hamas is a local organization deeply embedded in the Gaza Strip, but much of its strength comes from outside assistance.

October 7 mastermind and long-time Hamas military commander Mohammad Deif initiated a shift in Hamas' strategic thought during the late 2000s that ultimately led to the October 7 attacks. The IDF, Western media, and Palestinians close to Hamas each assert that Deif developed Hamas' underground attack tunnels that the group could use to conduct offensive operations into Israel.³⁶ This effort demonstrates that Deif and his inner circle began to think in terms of offensive ground operations instead of individual suicide bombings or rocket attacks long before October 7, 2023.

The majority of Hamas tunnels in the Gaza Strip prior to the late 2000s focused on supply and on enabling Hamas to defend the Gaza Strip from an Israeli ground operation.³⁷ Hamas did use some tunnels for offensive operations—such as the cross-border attack in which Hamas kidnapped Gilad Shalit in 2006—but these operations were designed to accomplish relatively limited tactical goals. Deif likely accelerated the shift towards offensive operations after the 2008 war, given the increased role of offensive tunnels in the 2014 Gaza War. The development of this infrastructure probably contributed to Iran's and Hamas' growing confidence in their capabilities between 2021 and 2023.

Hezbollah probably pioneered the concept of offensive ground operations into Israel in the early 2000s, leading to the establishment of the Radwan Force. Hezbollah's development of these capabilities began with a focus on kidnapping Israeli soldiers in Israel between 2000 and 2006 to achieve relatively limited strategic effects, such as the release of Lebanese prisoners.³⁸ Hezbollah founded the Radwan Force at some point during this period, tasking it with ground operations into Israel. The Radwan Force was allegedly responsible for the kidnapping of three Israeli soldiers in July 2006 that triggered the 2006 Lebanon War.³⁹ The 2006 War may have caused a rethink within Hezbollah and by Nasrallah, who recognized that the decision to kidnap Israeli soldiers in July 2006 was a miscalculation that generated only minimal gains for Hezbollah at great political cost. The IDF discovered the outcome of such a rethink in 2012, when it "identified" a Hezbollah plan funded and supplied by Iran that sought to "conquer" northern Israel in 2012.⁴⁰ Elite Hezbollah units would infiltrate from Lebanon into Israel under the plan and then enter Israeli communities, create defensive strong points, and then use Israeli civilians as human shields to withstand the inevitable Israeli counterattack.⁴¹ This illustrates the development of Hezbollah's offensive operations into Israel from relatively simple plans with limited objectives to much more ambitious operational- and strategic-level missions with further-reaching goals.

Hamas, led by Deif, watched these developments and began attempting to build its own strategic offensive capabilities. The 2014 Gaza War—

viewed in conjunction with the 2012 Hezbollah plan—demonstrated the way in which Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas hoped to conduct offensive operations into Israel in the future. Deif's focus on offensive tunnels two years later in the 2014 Gaza War underscored the importance Hamas had begun to place on similar—though (in 2014) less developed—offensive capabilities to those that Hezbollah planned to employ. Israel launched the 2014 Gaza War to decrease the threat of Hamas' rocket fire and its offensive tunnels. Hamas' use of tunnels became operationally significant in 2014 and those offensive operations provided the theoretical foundation for the October 7 attacks. Hamas fighters attempted to enter the Israeli town of Sufa in 2014 using an offensive tunnel, and the group would later attack Sufa after breaching the Gaza Strip-Israel border on October 7.⁴² Hamas created its elite commando force after 2014 modeled on Hezbollah's Radwan Force and tasked the commandos with penetrating the Israeli border.⁴³ The group could have concluded that regular fighters were insufficient for the task after Hamas' limited success in offensive operations in 2014. By 2023, Hamas was able to employ an effective commando force to breach Israel's border with the Strip and then exploit this initial success. The attack on October 7 showed that Hamas had almost certainly learned from Hezbollah's 2012 plan. Hamas plans seized by the IDF after the attack demonstrated that Hamas had sought to seize Israeli towns, strongpoint those positions, and then use hostages to limit the IDF's ability to counterattack.⁴⁴ Hamas' units lost discipline and proved unable to carry out this plan, but the plan's similarity to Hezbollah's 2012 plan suggests that Hamas learned from Hezbollah and developed a strategy of offensive operations that had much loftier objectives in mind than those it actually achieved.⁴⁵

Hamas' relationship with Iran was also undergoing major changes during the 2010s that would dramatically decrease the group's autonomy vis-à-vis Iran by the late 2010s. Hamas chose to back the Syrian opposition against Syrian President Bashar al Assad, to whose defense Iran fully committed, during the Arab Spring, causing Iran to dramatically reduce its investment in Hamas.⁴⁶ Iran maintained its ties with Hamas' hardline military leaders, however, thus strengthening them at the

expense of the relatively “moderate” political leaders such as Ismail Haniyeh.⁴⁷ Hamas and Iran reconciled by the mid-2010s, and Yahya Sinwar said in 2017 that his group's “relations with Iran are excellent and Iran is the largest supporter of” Hamas' military wing.⁴⁸

Hamas' return to Iran's orbit gave Sinwar and Deif more of the resources that both men would require to destroy Israel. Renewed Iranian support allowed Hamas to accelerate cooperation with other groups in Iran's Axis of Resistance (AoR). The AoR is Iran's unconventional alliance of state, non-state, and semi-state actors across the Middle East.⁴⁹ It includes Lebanese Hezbollah, Syria, Iranian-backed Shia militias in Iraq, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Houthis, among others.⁵⁰ These groups shelter Hamas leaders and help Hamas fundraise for its operations. PIJ and Hamas each have representatives in Houthi-controlled Yemen, for instance, who hold fundraisers in Yemen with Houthi support.⁵¹ The money they raise will help Hamas rebuild elements of its organization after the current war. The AoR has also helped Hamas in the past by smuggling weapons to Hamas and PIJ in the Gaza Strip, including during the 1990s and 2000s when the IDF controlled security in the Gaza Strip.⁵² Syria and Hezbollah will also be able to facilitate the development of Hamas elements based in southern Lebanon and southwestern Syria.⁵³ Hamas did not forewarn the AoR or Iran about the October 7 attack, but the military investments into Hamas by the AoR and Iran means these groups are at minimum culpable for the attack itself.⁵⁴

Hamas and the IRGC built a military coalition to strengthen Hamas as part of their plan to destroy the Israeli state before and after Hamas' return to Iran's orbit. The development of this coalition preceded and then expanded alongside the development of new plans and military infrastructure undertaken by Mohammad Deif. Hamas founded a joint operations room with Palestinian Islamic Jihad in 2006, but later expanded the room to include 12 militias in 2018, 10 of which took part in the October 7 attacks.⁵⁵ Iran has supported this Hamas-led Joint Operations Room in the Gaza Strip since at least 2020.⁵⁶ Hamas' control of the Palestinian Joint Operations Room placed the group at the head of a 12-member coalition of Iranian-backed Palestinian

militias.⁵⁷ This operations room likely improved coordination between the various Palestinian groups, allowing them to better plan to attack Israel and defend against IDF operations in the Gaza Strip. Yahya Sinwar notably highlighted the operations room as the “nucleus of the army of liberation” in 2018.⁵⁸ A senior Hamas military commander noted in June 2022 that Palestinian factions within the Palestinian Joint Operations Room would make a “collective decision” before future “confrontation with [Israel],” further indicating the coordinating role the room played on October 7.⁵⁹

This coalition serves as a force multiplier for Hamas and its Iranian backers. The coalition’s breadth also means that even if Israel destroyed Hamas, Iran could try to use other groups and Hamas’ remnants to build a new force in the Strip bent on Israel’s destruction. The Joint Operations Room also gives Hamas access to political support from other Palestinian factions—thus limiting the ability of Israel or the international community to sideline Hamas and empower another faction in a post-war scenario—and greater military prowess.

Iran’s increased support of Hamas in the latter half of the 2010s also increased Hamas’ military strength by integrating Hamas more closely into Iran’s AoR. This cooperation included funding, political support, and training. IRGC Quds Force commander Esmail Ghaani accelerated this process by directing the creation of a Joint Operations Room in 2021 including Hamas, Hezbollah, and the IRGC that the trio almost certainly used to plan for future wars with Israel.⁶⁰ Another Joint Operations Room formed in 2023 has enabled Iran and its militia partners and proxies—including Hamas, Hezbollah, militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen—to coordinate military operations across the region during the current war.⁶¹

Iran’s concerted effort to destroy Israel is not the sole driver of Hamas’ strength, however: Israeli policy decisions in the Gaza Strip have also enabled Hamas to strengthen itself. Israel has—with the support and encouragement of the West—allowed Qatar to aid Hamas financially to stave off economic collapse in the Gaza Strip, a policy that inadvertently helped Hamas invest in its military forces to prepare for October 7.

There will be no permanent peace between Hamas and Israel while Hamas holds the ideology that it was founded upon, and there will not be permanent peace inside the Gaza Strip as long as Hamas can reconstitute militarily. Hamas’ raison d’être is to destroy Israel, not to improve the lives of Gazans nor to establish an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Economic investment in general lets Hamas deprioritize its own funding for reconstruction and civilian infrastructure projects while expanding its military infrastructure under and in the Strip. This issue is important for Hamas because the group still relies partly on its reputation for providing services to Gazans as part of its general basis of support, unlike groups such as al Qaeda in Iraq or the Islamic State that felt less pressure to invest resources into civilian projects. A Qatari official told NPR in 2015 that Qatar invests in the Gaza Strip to “help the Palestinian people, not Hamas,” but added that in order to “help Gaza... Hamas is” the best conduit.⁶² Qatar invested \$1.8 billion into the Gaza Strip between 2007 and 2021 to support reconstruction and other projects.⁶³ This investment is notable because some Israeli experts estimate that Hamas invested “billions” into their military tunnel network.⁶⁴ Israeli military officers also said in 2014 that Hamas had diverted international aid to its tunnel program.⁶⁵ Providing aid to Hamas-run organizations does help Gazans, but it also frees up Hamas spending for military purposes. Hamas would be forced to decide between helping Gazans and spending on military infrastructure if this aid was not provided.

There will be no permanent peace between Hamas and Israel while Hamas holds the ideology that it was founded upon, and there will not be permanent peace inside the Gaza Strip as long as Hamas can reconstitute militarily. Hamas’ raison d’être is to destroy Israel, not to improve the lives of Gazans nor to establish an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It instead seeks to establish Islamist

Palestinian rule over all of Israel, and it views control over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as interim steps towards Israel's destruction and replacement.⁶⁶ Israel and its partners cannot create a peaceful, post-Hamas Gaza Strip without ensuring that a new governing authority can be protected from Hamas remnants, a rebuilding Hamas, or other groups sharing Hamas' destructive ideology. Building a post-Hamas Gaza Strip is not as simple as identifying a successor or successor organization and then rolling out a government-in-a-box. Hamas' political wing exists to support its military wing, and one of the military wing's key

Why October 7?

objectives is to help maintain the political wing's control over the Gaza Strip.⁶⁷ Thus, the political wing will use its resources—both diplomatic and financial—to help reconstitute even a severely damaged military wing while the military wing seeks to use its remaining combat power to defeat any new governing authority. Even a defeated Hamas can and will rebuild itself absent Israeli or international action to prevent Hamas' reconstitution. Hamas' integration into the AoR amplifies the challenges of creating a peaceful Gaza Strip, because Iran can and probably will invest in rebuilding Hamas' remnants after the war. Iranian investment will make it more difficult to destroy Hamas. Hamas' future actions will force the Israeli state to fight in the Gaza Strip again in the future unless the IDF and its partners render Hamas unable to reconstitute militarily.

Hamas launched a total war on October 7 that marked a major change in the way Hamas sought to accomplish its objectives by force. The October 7 War was aimed at destroying the Israeli state; it was not aimed only at more limited objectives such as securing aid, freeing prisoners, or destroying the normalization process between Israel and the Arab states.⁶⁸ Hamas' October 7 attack also drew on concepts first pioneered by Hezbollah and Iran. Iran has articulated an increasingly concrete operational concept focusing on ground attacks that Tehran thinks will destroy the Israeli state.⁶⁹ Hamas' attack was modeled on these concepts.⁷⁰ Hamas and its allies initiated the war on

October 7, 2023 as part of the multi-generational fight against Israel that Hamas intends to end in the destruction of the Israeli state.⁷¹ Hamas sees this multi-generational fight playing out over several distinct phases. First, Hamas undermined secular Palestinian groups to Islamicize the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.⁷² Hamas then sought to stall the Oslo Peace Process to prevent the international community from blocking the hypothetical pathway to an Islamic Palestinian state covering the entirety of Palestine.⁷³ Hamas saw the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and Hamas' subsequent takeover of the Strip from Fatah in 2007 as realization of its control of "some parts" of Palestine.⁷⁴ The Gaza Strip is not Hamas' ultimate goal, however, nor is the establishment of a Palestinian state that includes only Gaza and the West Bank.⁷⁵ Hamas seeks to destroy Israel and replace it with an Islamist Palestinian state.⁷⁶

Neither Israel nor Hamas waged previous Israel-Hamas wars totally, and both parties' immediate political goals were far narrower during previous conflicts than they are in the current Israel-Hamas War. Hamas initiated earlier wars by launching limited ground attacks and firing rockets into southern Israel after Israel constrained the flow of goods into Gaza.⁷⁷ Israel usually increased restrictions on the flow of certain goods into the Strip—such as concrete for tunnels in 2014—because Hamas was using these goods to build infrastructure that would allow the group to attack Israel.⁷⁸ Israeli embargoes also threatened Hamas' authority in the Gaza Strip by severely damaging the economy.⁷⁹

Hamas' attack on October 7 led to a wave of rhetorical support among Arab states, but it will likely fail to generate any material or sustained diplomatic support for Hamas' goal of isolating Israel and "putting the Palestinian issue back on the table."⁸⁰ Hamas probably sought to leverage the attacks to isolate Israel and raise the profile of the Palestinian issue, but this was not the war's primary aim. The war has failed to generate practical Arab support in part because Iran has supplanted Israel as the primary threat to many Arab states, and the Arab states recognize that aligning with Israel would satisfy their economic and security needs. A stronger relationship

with Israel provides the Arab states with other economic benefits to modernize their economies, such as improved trade routes.⁸¹ Arab states—including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco—have offered vocal support for the Palestinians, but these states have not taken the serious action against Israel that Hamas may have hoped they would. Saudi Arabia has privately expressed its willingness to normalize ties with Israel since October 7. US President Joe Biden observed in December 2023 that Saudi Arabia would normalize relations with Israel after the war if the international community devised a new plan for a two-state solution.⁸² None of the Arab states closely allied with the United States (excluding Qatar) have demonstrated a willingness to engage with Hamas or isolate Israel in any capacity. Some states, including Jordan, actively contributed to Israel's defense during Iran's April 13, 2024, drone and missile attack.⁸³

This total war represents a major change in the way Hamas seeks to accomplish its objectives, and it probably sets a new model for future wars based on Hamas and Iran's plans to destroy Israel outlined above. The long planning process for this operation and the long-term objectives of Hamas suggest that the war was launched to achieve maximalist goals. An IRGC-affiliated publication said shortly after October 7 that the attack took four years to plan, meaning the planning process began roughly 12 months before the UAE and Bahrain normalized with Israel in September 2020.⁸⁴ Other Palestinian sources said the planning began even earlier, perhaps even before the 2014 Gaza War.⁸⁵ Hamas and the IRGC told the world what they sought on October 7. Sinwar said "victory was nigh" and called for a "raging flood" to destroy Israel during a Hamas-organized conference in 2021 about governing Israel after Israel's destruction, and IRGC commander Hossein Salami argued in August 2022 that only a "ground force" could destroy Israel.⁸⁶ Hamas and Iran probably sought to damage Israel's relationship with the Arab States during the war and they have exploited the war to that end, but this was not the primary objective of the war itself.

Both Hamas and Iran are becoming increasingly confident in their ability to destroy Israel, meaning that October 7-like attacks may be attempted again in the future. Iran and Hamas held this view

after observing major protests against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over judicial reforms beginning in early 2023.⁸⁷ The protests increased Iran's confidence that its proxies and partners could destroy Israel, given that Iran probably assessed that the protests demonstrated Israeli weakness and disunity. Iran's and Hamas' perception of Israeli weakness reinforced an already-existing mindset shared by Iran and Hamas that Israelis are not motivated to stand and fight for their country over the long term and that a series of successive ground operations will lead to "great waves of emigrating [Israelis]" and the destruction of the Israeli state.⁸⁸ The similarly large anti-Netanyahu protests in support of a ceasefire deal in late summer 2024 are probably also causing Hamas to assess that Israel's will to continue the war is decreasing, thus causing senior Hamas leaders to hold out for Israeli capitulation to Hamas demands.

A combination of this long-held assessment of Israeli weakness and the more recent observation of Israeli divisions drove Iranian and Hamas calculations that led to October 7. Salami argued in 2022 that the Palestinian factions were strong enough to transition from "static wars" characterized by rocket and missile fire to the deployment of a "ground-based force...[to] liberate [Palestine] step-by-step."⁸⁹ The new phase of operations will—according to Iran—lead to Israel's collapse due to the pressures of war.⁹⁰ Hamas has echoed Iran's sentiments. Sinwar issued a statement during a Hamas-run conference in 2021 in which he said that "the full liberation of Palestine from the sea to the river" is at "the heart of Hamas' strategic vision."⁹¹ A senior Hamas official said on October 24, 2023 that the group would conduct similar terrorist attacks "a second, a third, a fourth" time until Israel is destroyed, underlining this point.⁹²

Hamas' operational security meant that while the October 7 attacks were tactically successful, Hamas was unable to draw on its allies to exploit their success. Hamas' failure to exploit its tactical success represents a failure in planning and flawed assumptions, but this failure does not change the fact that Hamas launched a total war in which it sought to destroy Israel. Hamas did not warn Hezbollah until only a few hours before the attack began, and Iran received no forewarning.⁹³ The lack

of communication protected Hamas' operational security but meant that Iran and its AoR could not support Hamas with ground forces, from Syria or Lebanon even if they wanted to. Hamas' ability to exploit its tactical successes on the morning of October 7 into operational or strategic success was further hampered by the apparent loss of discipline among Hamas fighters, who chose to take hostages back to the Gaza Strip instead of strong-pointing Israeli towns in the Gaza Envelope and taking and holding the hostages in those towns, as their orders called for.⁹⁴

Hamas planned to take hostages in its original plans, but the area in which its fighters eventually held those hostages—in the Gaza Strip, as opposed to inside Israel itself—differed due to the collapse of Hamas discipline on October 7.⁹⁵ Hamas learned how to exploit hostages by observing Hezbollah and Iran and by absorbing lessons learned from previous hostage exchanges with Israel. Iran and Hezbollah have both used hostages as a tactic to secure political gains locally and regionally since the 1980s.⁹⁶ Hamas likely understood that

to survive this war it would need to translate its initial attack on October 7 into a strategic victory. This understanding probably drove its decision to take Israeli hostages on October 7 because Hamas recognized that the hostages would help enable it to survive the inevitable Israeli assault.⁹⁷ Hamas is exploiting the Israeli hostages whom it and its allied groups hold to ensure that Hamas survives and ideally that Hamas and its partners are involved in any future Gazan government.⁹⁸ Hamas secured the freedom of key Hamas leaders (including Yahya Sinwar) by taking a single Israeli hostage in 2006, which proved to Hamas that it could translate even one hostage into a significant strategic gain.⁹⁹ Hamas's seizure of the hostages allowed the group to use the hostages as a bargaining chip that would allow Hamas to maintain its centrality in the governance of the Gaza Strip after the war. Hamas has repeatedly tied the release of hostages to a full Israeli withdrawal that would leave Hamas in power or allow it to rebuild its strength.¹⁰⁰ This survival would allow Iran and Hamas to claim victory and to set

Defining Delay, Clear, Defense, and Reconstitution

“Delay” is a term of art used by the US military. According to US military doctrine, a force “under pressure” conducts a delaying operation by “trading space for time by slowing down the enemy’s momentum and inflicting maximum damage on the enemy without, in principle, becoming decisively engaged.”¹⁰¹ A delay usually gives priority to gaining time for the delaying force over inflicting casualties on the attacking force or holding ground.¹⁰² A delaying force employed in a doctrinally correct manner will become decisively engaged if or when the opposing force penetrates certain areas.¹⁰³

“Clear” is another term of art used by the US military. According to US military doctrine, the commander of a clearing force seeks to “remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area.”¹⁰⁴ The enemy force probably maintains “underground and auxiliary elements...in the area [of the clearing] operations” after a clear.¹⁰⁵ The IDF operations in the Gaza Strip have been consistent with clearing operations.

US military doctrine defines a defense as a set of tasks “conducted to defeat an [opposing force’s] attack, gain time, economize forces, and develop conditions favorable for offensive or stability tasks.”¹⁰⁶ A defense is not passive. The defender “aggressively seeks ways to” attrit and weaken the attacker by maneuvering to “place the [attacking force] in a position of disadvantage” by attacking “at every opportunity” and with every asset at the defender’s disposal.¹⁰⁷ A defense aims to hold the ground being attacked or as much of it as possible. The defense contrasts with a delay, which assumes that the ground may ultimately be lost.

US military doctrine defines reconstitution as a set of “extraordinary actions that commanders take to restore degraded units to combat effectiveness commensurate with mission requirements and available resources.”¹⁰⁸ Hamas has been attempting to execute this task in the northern Gaza Strip since late winter 2024, with only limited success.

conditions for future attacks incorporating the lessons learned from October 7. These attacks could come from the Gaza Strip or elsewhere.

Hamas probably underestimated the degree of US support for the Israeli response by basing its assumptions about US behavior on recent history. Hamas likely recognized that Israel would respond to October 7 with an intense and unprecedented military offensive into the Gaza Strip, but recent history suggested that US and international support would flag as the operation dragged into a weeks-long venture. Hamas likely drew this lesson from the Israeli operations in Lebanon (2006) and from previous wars in the Gaza Strip (in 2008-9 and 2014).¹⁰⁹ The United States and the West placed immense pressure on the Israelis to curtail their operations during each of those conflicts, ultimately causing the Israelis to end their wars in each instance.

This Hamas assumption meant that the group likely expected that it could curtail the Israeli operation by securing a ceasefire that would free Israeli hostages in return for an Israeli withdrawal. Hamas leaders have said repeatedly during the war that they will refuse to release any hostages prior to a complete ceasefire that forces Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, thus leaving Hamas in power and free to threaten Israel in future wars.¹¹⁰ Hamas officials told Reuters in November that the organization believed “it [could] hold Israel’s advance long enough to force [Israel] to agree to a ceasefire.”¹¹¹ Hamas officials were clear-eyed about the task facing them, however. Senior Hamas Political Bureau member Ghazi Hamad said that the group would “have to pay a price” and was “ready for it.”¹¹² Hamas prepared for a major Israeli response lasting “months” but failed to fully appreciate the degree of Israeli and international political will generated by the scale and horror of the October 7 attacks.¹¹³ The group also appears to have failed to foresee the transformation in Israeli attitudes triggered by the October 7 attacks, as the Israeli government has shown a nearly unprecedented willingness to resist international and US pressure because of the existential nature of the threat Israelis now perceive.

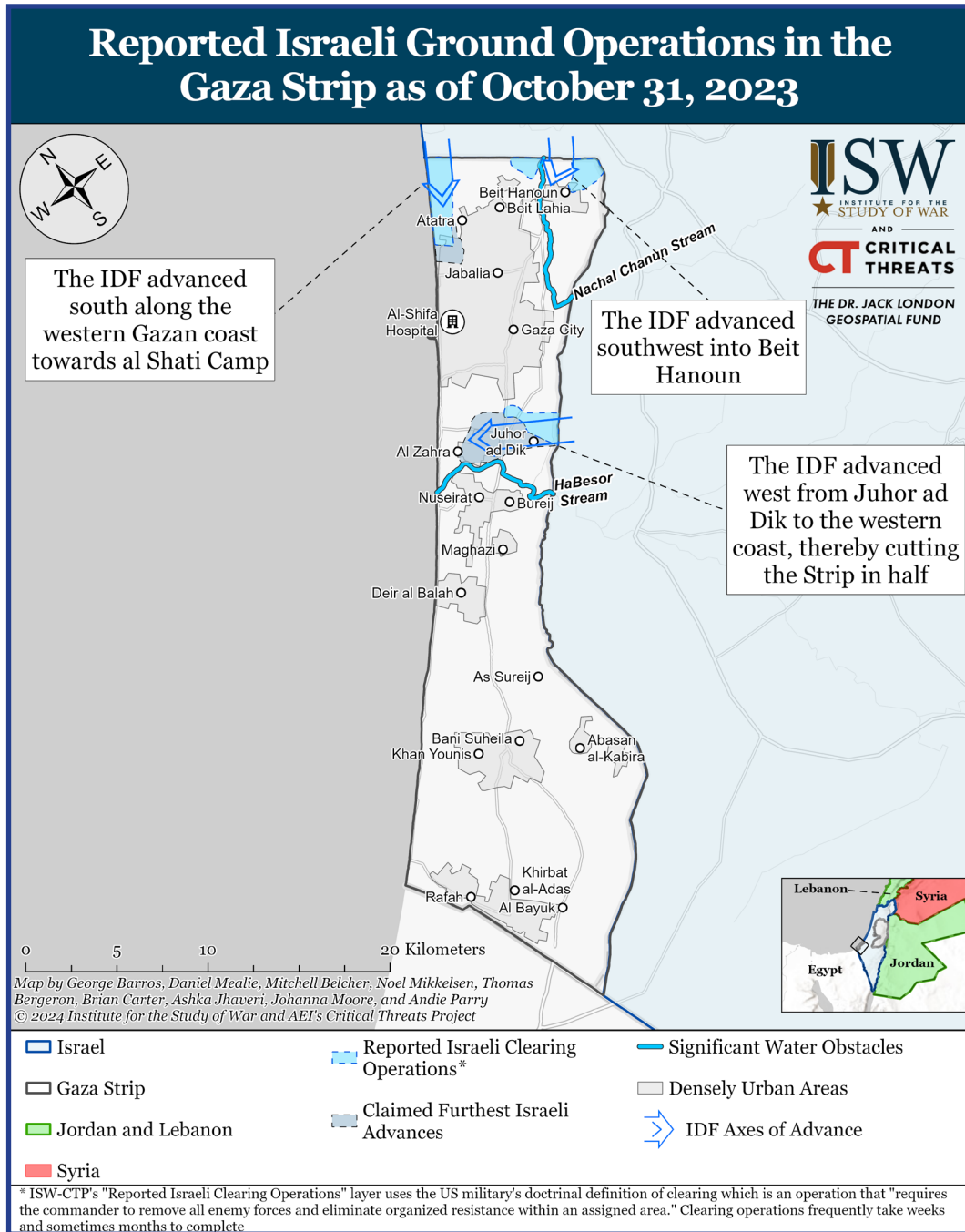
Hamas began an information operation in the immediate aftermath of October 7 that sought to secure a ceasefire by decreasing US and international support for the war to force Israel

Hamas appears to have failed to foresee the transformation in Israeli attitudes triggered by the October 7 attacks, as the Israeli government has shown a nearly unprecedented willingness to resist international and US pressure because of the existential nature of the threat Israelis now perceive.

to limit or end its operation. Hamas—supported by its partners and allies in the AoR—messed that the United States and Israel had instigated the war and that they were committing “acts of aggression” and “genocide” against the Palestinian people.¹¹⁴ Hamas justified its choice to launch the war in the days and weeks after October 7 by claiming that the attacks were necessary for the survival of the Palestinian cause.¹¹⁵ Hamas officials claimed that they had “no choice” but to “change the equation” by conducting the October 7 attacks to subject Israel to a “permanent state of war.”¹¹⁶ This argument implicitly alleges that Israel started the conflict by destroying Palestinian hopes for an independent state. Hamas’ sophisticated propaganda machine has continued this line of effort, publishing slick documents presenting its arguments in multiple languages, including English.¹¹⁷ This information operation failed to secure a ceasefire before the ground operation began and has so far continued to fail to achieve that objective.

The Israeli Ground Operation Begins

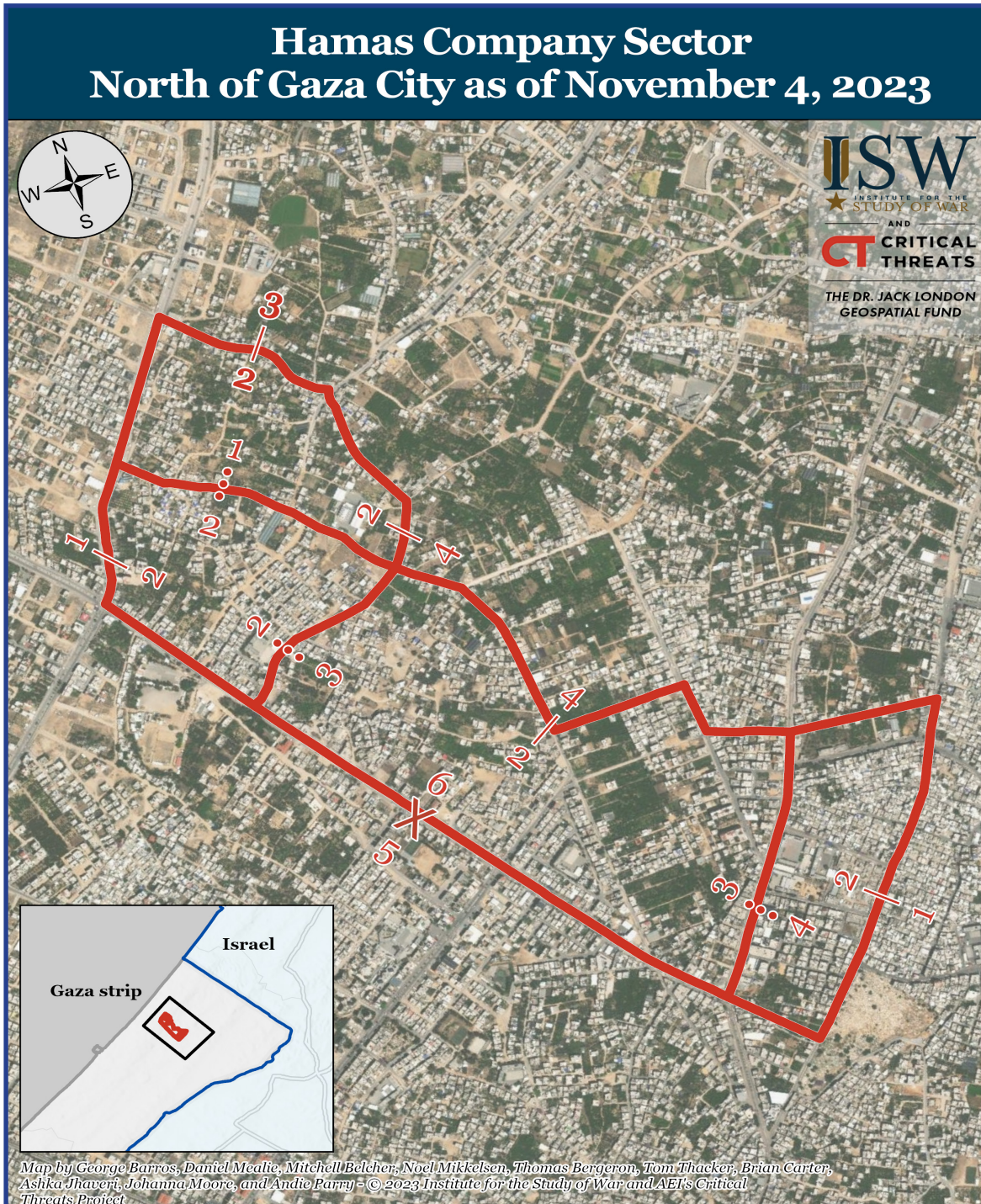
Israeli ground operations in the northern Gaza Strip began on October 27 with advances along three axes: a southward drive along the western coast towards al Shati camp, a southwestward drive into Beit Hanoun, and a westward drive from Juhor ad Dik to the western coast, thereby cutting the Strip in half and isolating the northern Gaza Strip from the southern Strip.¹¹⁸ Hamas had miscalculated the likely intent and intensity of Israel’s planned operations, as noted above, and so did not initially attempt to conduct a deliberate



defense of northern Gaza. It instead began a delaying operation in which it sought gradually to trade space for the time in which it expected that international pressure and domestic pressure to liberate the hostages would force Israel to suspend operations. Hamas leadership recognized that the group would suffer significant losses in this operation, but likely calculated that a delaying operation would be both more effective and less costly in the end than attempting a deliberate

defense with the aim of holding northern Gaza against the IDF.

Hamas did not distribute enough forces in the northern Strip to hold terrain by design. Israeli forces captured Hamas plans apparently showing a Hamas company's area of responsibility between al Tawm and Fallujah roads west of Jabalia on November 4 (see page 16).¹¹⁹ The sector—which was a half a kilometer deep and 1.5 kilometers across—was far too large for a company-sized



unit to defend against a mechanized advance in an urban area.¹²⁰ This distribution is part of the evidence that Hamas did not heavily commit to defending Gaza City's northern outskirts and instead sought initially to delay Israeli advances.¹²¹

Hamas did not use its most sophisticated equipment or tactics during the initial delay phase. The group's decision to hold its advanced weapons

in reserve and to avoid using more sophisticated tactics supports the assessment that it was not conducting a deliberate defense but instead trading space for time in an attempt to secure a ceasefire. Hamas only used its advanced systems—such as explosively formed penetrators (EFP)—in limited instances prior to the start of the temporary pause in fighting that began on November 24.¹²² An EFP

is a particularly lethal improvised explosive device that is designed to penetrate armored vehicles and kill the crew within.¹²³ Iranian-backed militias used these systems—which can destroy M1 tanks—in Iraq against US forces, killing 196 US servicemembers in five years.¹²⁴ Hamas fighters also did not report that they conducted major multi-part or complex ambushes targeting Israeli forces during the initial phase of its operation.

Hamas executed its operations based on the terrain and forces available to its commanders. Hamas likely expected a major armored assault targeting the Gaza Strip. Hamas' light infantry formations would be ill-prepared to defend against the IDF's armored forces in the less-built-up suburban terrain of the city's outskirts. Most of Gaza City's outskirts are not heavily built-up relative to other areas in the northern Strip, such as Shujaiya and Jabalia. Hamas sensibly avoided trying to hold ground in those suburban areas.

The speed of the IDF's initial advance also suggests Hamas' operations differed based on terrain. Lead IDF elements south of Gaza City and in the northwestern Strip reached the western Gazan coast south of Gaza City and the northern outskirts of Shati Camp respectively on November 2.¹²⁵ The IDF forces advancing from the northeast did not defeat Hamas' Beit Hanoun Battalion until December 18, nearly two months after the beginning of the ground operation.¹²⁶ Beit Hanoun is a city in the northeastern Gaza Strip barely a kilometer from the Israel-Gaza Strip border. The delay in the IDF's seizure of Beit Hanoun suggests that Hamas conducted a more deliberate defense in urban areas where it could hope to pin IDF forces for a while but traded space for time in less-built up areas where Hamas' light infantry could not withstand a concerted mechanized assault.

Hamas appears to have initially distributed its forces based on expectations from previous Israeli operations and on faulty assumptions by Hamas' leadership. An IDF assessment suggested that Israeli raids near Beit Hanoun before October 27 confirmed Hamas' belief that the Israeli main effort would precede along the Beit Hanoun axis.¹²⁷ This belief may have been reinforced by Hamas' experiences in 2014, when the IDF moved against Hamas primarily from the east and deployed three brigades adjacent to Shujaiya and Jabalia and only one brigade each for Beit Hanoun and the western

coast.¹²⁸ Hamas' assumptions were therefore faulty, given that the Israeli main effort instead fell upon Hamas' coastal sectors, and circumvented what the IDF assessed were Hamas' main defensive positions.¹²⁹ This explanation is also consistent with the rapid operations in the coastal sector, while IDF forces took much longer to defeat Hamas in Beit Hanoun.

The delay phase also bought time for some Hamas forces and commanders to escape further south or prepare defenses in more important areas, such as central Gaza City or in Khan Younis. One function of delaying operations is to “buy time to establish an effective defense” elsewhere.¹³⁰ Hamas almost certainly planned from the outset to transition to a deliberate defense if its efforts to secure a ceasefire failed or when the IDF penetrated important areas, such as Shujaiya or central Gaza City. The delay phase probably also allowed some Hamas leaders—particularly those responsible for governance, rather than military operations—to slip south and away from active Israeli ground operations. An unverified social media account alleged on November 18 that Hamas leaders were fleeing south, and the IDF reported on February 26 that Hamas tunnels helped enable the movement of Hamas' Central and Gaza City Brigades between the central and northern parts of the Strip.¹³¹

Hamas coupled its delaying operation with an information campaign that sought to erode international support for Israeli ground operations and secure a ceasefire. Hamas focused on Israeli conduct near hospitals and other civilian sites.¹³² The group argued that hospitals and other civilian infrastructure were protected sites while simultaneously highlighting the role that some civilian infrastructure, such as mosques, played in its defensive positions and its attacks. Hamas claimed that its forces attacked an Israeli unit attempting to breach a tunnel near al Nasr Mosque in Beit Hanoun on November 16, for example.¹³³ The presence of this tunnel near the mosque and the Hamas decision to initiate an engagement with Israeli forces near a mosque is indicative of the way in which Hamas uses civilian sites to support its military activities.

Israel attempted to counteract this Hamas narrative by publicizing its discoveries at hospitals and the activities of Hamas fighters nearby.



Israel discovered a large length of tunnel under al Shifa Hospital after capturing the hospital in November.¹³⁴ The IDF also detained the al Shifa and Kamal Adwan hospital directors for their cooperation with Hamas military forces.¹³⁵ US officials said in mid-November that US intelligence separately confirmed that Hamas used al Shifa hospital to “conceal and support [Hamas] military operations and to hold hostages.”¹³⁶

Hamas’ efforts to force a permanent ceasefire through this combination of delaying and information operations ultimately failed. Hamas began to actively pursue a Qatari-mediated ceasefire after the Israeli ground operation began.¹³⁷ The Israelis only began to actively seek a short-term pause in mid-November as they secured more of the northern Gaza Strip.¹³⁸ Israel and Hamas agreed to a short-term pause in fighting that went into effect on November 24.¹³⁹ The deal

stipulated that Hamas would release small groups of Israeli hostages in return for the release of Israeli-held Palestinian prisoners and an increase in aid entering the Gaza Strip.¹⁴⁰ Israel would also stop aerial surveillance of the Gaza Strip under the agreement.¹⁴¹

Israel carefully framed the ceasefire talks around narrow negotiations for the release of the hostages and not a broader, permanent end to the fighting. Netanyahu gave a speech on November 22 in which

he said that while Israel would bring “[all the hostages] back home,” he wanted “to be clear – the war is continuing” after the truce and that the war would continue until Israel accomplished its goals.¹⁴² Netanyahu repeated this refrain for every day of the ceasefire, including during meetings with US President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.¹⁴³ Netanyahu told Blinken on November 30—one day prior to the end of the

Hamas' Strategic Choice to Use Civilian Infrastructure to Protect Military Operations

Hamas made a strategic choice to use civilian infrastructure to enable its military operations. The group uses UN facilities, schools, hospitals, mosques, and other civilian areas to shield military headquarters, rocket launch sites, and other military assets from Israeli attack.¹⁴⁴ Hamas probably assesses that this decision will shield its military infrastructure from some Israeli attacks by increasing the risk for Israel that a strike will cause outside political blowback and diminish Israel's international support.

Hamas and other Palestinian militias' activities around al Shifa Hospital are emblematic of Hamas' strategic choice to use civilian infrastructure. The IDF said in October and November 2023 that Hamas was using al Shifa Hospital as a military headquarters.¹⁴⁵ The United States confirmed this IDF claim using independent US-collected intelligence.¹⁴⁶ The IDF descended upon al Shifa from the north and south in early November 2023 in a well-telegraphed pincer movement. The IDF discovered tunnel systems under the hospital in November.¹⁴⁷ Hamas fighters were likely able to flee the hospital facility in early November 2023, however, given that the IDF's pincer movement took weeks to reach the hospital.¹⁴⁸ Unverified social media accounts reported in 2023 that Hamas fighters were fleeing south, and the IDF has repeatedly discovered tunnels crossing from the northern Strip into the southern Strip that would have enabled additional Hamas fighters and commanders to flee underneath the IDF.¹⁴⁹ IDF commanders were reportedly surprised by these tunnels because they did not previously believe that it would be possible to build tunnels underneath the wetlands of Wadi Gaza, which bisects the Gaza Strip south of Gaza City.¹⁵⁰

The IDF subsequently left the al Shifa area, allowing al Shifa Hospital to gradually resume operations. Hamas and other Palestinian militias infiltrated the area again after the IDF withdrawal and reoccupied the hospital between November 2023 and February 2024.¹⁵¹ This infiltration was done without regard for the safety of patients and doctors in the hospital, given that Hamas knew a military presence could trigger a new IDF raid. The IDF launched a surprise, brigade-sized raid in response to the infiltration. The raid captured at least 500 fighters and killed 200 more.¹⁵² This suggests that Hamas and its allies had determined that the international blowback from earlier Israeli operations near al Shifa would make the IDF more reticent to raid the hospital. This may have led Hamas commanders to conclude that they could safely reoccupy the hospital.

Hamas also uses Hamas-affiliated civil servants to amplify Hamas' information operations that augment military operations. These information operations seek to undermine Israel's international support by highlighting Israeli operations against Hamas-occupied civilian infrastructure. Hamas controls the government in Gaza and it staffs its ministries with Hamas supporters.¹⁵³ Hamas increased the proportion of Hamas supporters staffing the Health Ministry after the group evicted Fatah from the Gaza Strip in 2007.¹⁵⁴ These supporters frequently issue statements on behalf of the Health Ministry, highlighting Israeli "attacks on hospitals."¹⁵⁵ These statements are often taken at face value by Western media. Health Ministry officials publicly demonstrate their support of Hamas and its violent tactics. Former Health Ministry Spokesperson Adham Abu Salmiya, for example, said on February 20, 2024, that God should "protect" Yahya Sinwar and "burn the hearts" of the "Zionists and their dogs."¹⁵⁶ Adham Abu Salmiya is notably the nephew of the al Shifa Hospital director, Mohammad Abu Salmiya.¹⁵⁷ Mohammad Abu Salmiya also served as the head of the Islamic Medical Bloc, a Hamas-controlled political group that is part of the Palestinian Doctors' Syndicate.¹⁵⁸ Abu Salmiya told several Western outlets that Hamas "[did] not operate" at al Shifa Hospital and called Israel's allegations that Hamas conducted operations from the hospital "untrue."¹⁵⁹

truce—that Israel had “sworn to eliminate Hamas,” and “nothing will stop [Israel]” from accomplishing that objective.¹⁶⁰

Israel’s consistent messaging during the ceasefire signaled to Hamas that to withstand Israel’s advance, the group would need to adopt a new operational approach for the war’s next phase. Hamas recognized that, unlike in other wars, Israel aimed to destroy—not merely degrade—the group’s military, political, and civil capabilities. Israel stopped its advances in the 2008 and 2014 Gaza Wars after penetrating only outlying areas in the Strip, which allowed Hamas to successfully employ delaying operations when and where necessary.¹⁶¹ Hamas could no longer afford to conduct a delaying operation in the current war once Israel prepared to launch assaults into Hamas strongholds in Shujaiya, Jabalia, and Khan Younis. Hamas found itself forced to defend.

The Defense Begins

Hamas violated the truce agreement an hour before the agreement was set to end by firing an unspecified projectile within the Gaza Strip on December 1, 2023.¹⁶² The IDF resumed offensive operations in the Gaza Strip on the same day. The IDF began ground operations in Khan Younis on December 3, entering urban areas in Khan Younis and Bani Suheila in the southern Strip on December 5.¹⁶³ The IDF also encircled Hamas fighters in Shujaiya in the northern Strip on December 4.¹⁶⁴ The IDF advanced with greater speed after the pause in fighting. The IDF quickly moved its forces from the Kissufim crossing to the northern Khan Younis outskirts between December 3 and 5.¹⁶⁵ Hamas forces in both Khan Younis and Shujaiya became decisively engaged in a deliberate defense against the IDF operation in early December 2023.¹⁶⁶

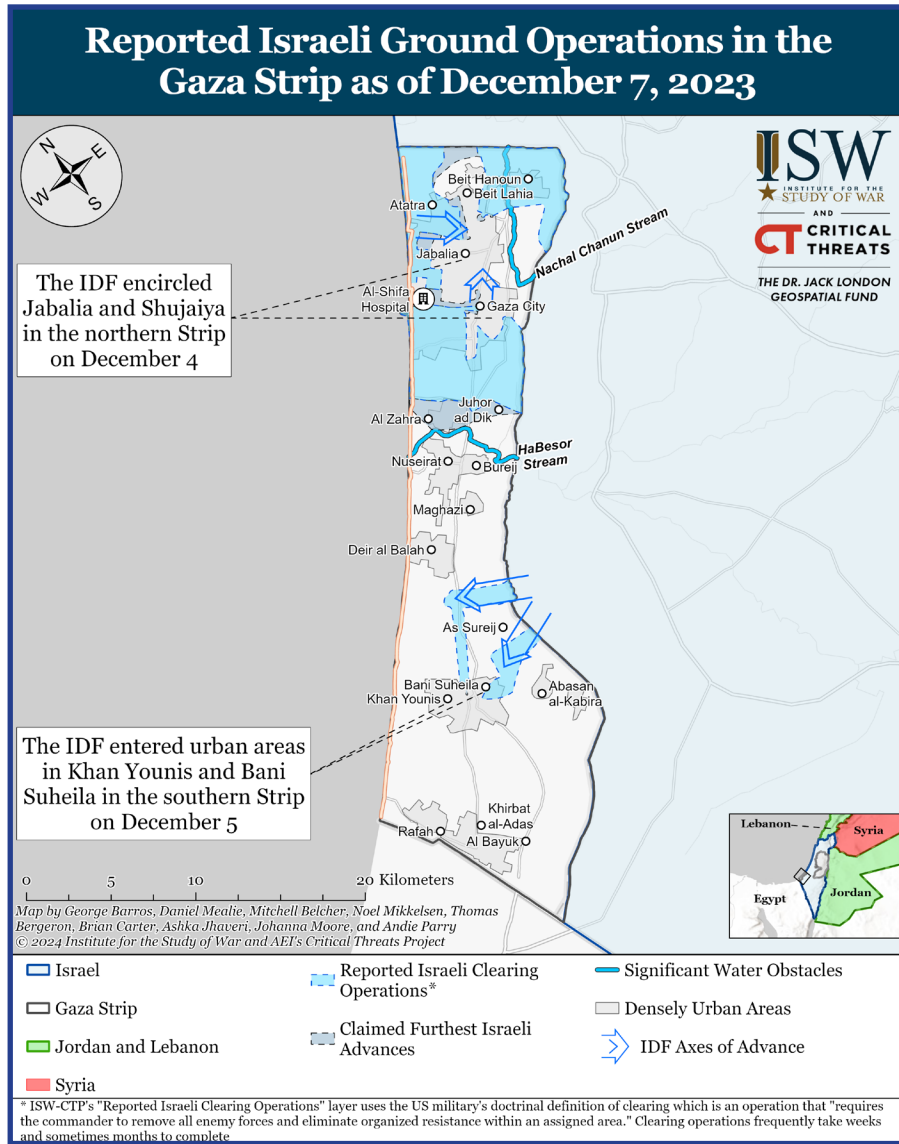
A combination of political and military considerations drove Hamas’ decision between December 1 and December 5 to shift from its delay effort towards becoming decisively engaged in a deliberate defense against the IDF. Hamas had failed in its objectives of breaking either Israel’s will to continue fighting or the United States’ willingness to continue supporting Israel through the delay period. Israel’s adherence to its

stated objective of destroying Hamas—coupled with increasingly reluctant but consistent US support—meant that a deliberate defense would be necessary to attrit Israeli forces and degrade Israeli domestic will to continue the war. The simultaneous movement of the fighting into more militarily important areas also meant that Hamas could no longer afford to trade space for time. Khan Younis was particularly important for Hamas, given the presence of Hamas’ top military leaders there.¹⁶⁷ The fighting between the IDF and Palestinian militias after December 1 moved into more built-up urban areas in both the northern and southern Strip. Urban terrain is better defensive ground for a light infantry force defending against a mechanized assault and provided Hamas an opportunity to use more sophisticated equipment and tactics to defend against the Israeli offensive with better odds of success.

Hamas and its allies began using more sophisticated tactics across the Strip after December 1, a change that indicates that the group had committed to a deliberate defense and ceased husbanding high-end capabilities in the delay. There were only two reported instances of Hamas using EFPs before December 1.¹⁶⁸ Hamas and its allies used EFPs five times between December 1 and 3 and continued using EFPs thereafter.¹⁶⁹ Palestinian militias also used complex attacks in Shujaiya and Jabalia, including one complex, multi-stage attack in mid-December that killed nine IDF soldiers.¹⁷⁰ Israeli news site Yedioth Ahronoth reported in early December that Hamas fighters in Shujaiya had “not fled” and were “fighting fiercely” against the IDF.¹⁷¹ This change in Hamas tactics in the north is consistent with a shift from a delay to a defend mission.

Hamas recognized that, unlike in other wars, Israel aimed to destroy—not merely degrade—the group’s military, political, and civil capabilities.

Hamas and other Palestinian militias may also have used the pause in fighting to rest, regroup, and implement the lessons they had learned



fighting the Israelis since the ground operation began. Israeli Army Radio reported on December 24 that Hamas began implementing lessons learned to improve the group's ability to defend against Israeli operations. The report said that Hamas learned "how the IDF works and what [the IDF's] weak points are."¹⁷² The report added that Hamas had learned that the IDF used unarmored vehicles to travel down some roads that Israeli forces believed were safe.¹⁷³ This learning process enabled Hamas to cause IDF casualties with greater ease.

Hamas' defensive effort sought to stop the Israeli ground operation from destroying Hamas by degrading the Israeli will to continue the ground operation by attriting Israeli forces. Hamas and its allies couple this military effort

with their information effort that aims to generate international pressure on Israel to stop fighting. Hamas killed 100 Israeli soldiers between December 1, 2023 and January 1, 2024, compared to only 70 Israeli soldiers between October 27, 2023 and the start of the pause in fighting in late November 2023.¹⁷⁴ Hamas likely hoped that the combination of higher casualties and the hostages still in Hamas' possession could lead to a more enduring ceasefire.¹⁷⁵ Domestic Israeli pressure to recover the hostages—even at the expense of abandoning the effort to destroy Hamas—began to gain momentum through December 2023 and January 2024. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, for example, said on December 23, 2023, that Israel had only two options to end the war:

a “ceasefire with living hostages” or a “forced cessation of hostilities with dead [hostages].”¹⁷⁶ This pressure has only accelerated since late 2023, with major protests in August and September 2024 calling for an end to the war and the release of the hostages.

Hamas’ defense nevertheless began to crumble in the northern Gaza Strip in mid-December 2023 due to intense IDF pressure. Hamas maintained command-and-control in most of the northern Strip until mid-December. The IDF said on December 18 that it destroyed Hamas’ Beit Hanoun Battalion and added three days later that Israeli forces were in “operational control” of Shujaiya.¹⁷⁷ IDF 36th Division officers said on December 21 that Hamas’ Shujaiya Battalion had conducted “almost no...attacks” targeting Israeli forces after December 14.¹⁷⁸ Other Palestinian militias continued attacks targeting the IDF in Shujaiya, illustrating the challenges the IDF faced in defeating Hamas and its allies. Other Hamas allies could continue attacks against the IDF in pursuit of Hamas’ overall objectives as part of the Hamas-led Joint Operations Room.

Hamas fighters continued to conduct a deliberate defense elsewhere in the Gaza Strip despite the groups’ decreased ability to fight the IDF in the north. The IDF continued operations against Hamas in Khan Younis and began a new clearing operation in the central Strip on December 21.¹⁷⁹ Hamas continued its defense in Khan Younis and the central Strip even as most of the northern Strip fell under the IDF’s “operational control” by December 23.¹⁸⁰ The IDF launched new clearing operations in western Khan Younis on January 22, 2024 and in Qarara and Hamad, north of Khan Younis, on March 3, 2024.¹⁸¹ Hamas continued to defend against IDF operations in Khan Younis until April 6, when the IDF withdrew from the southern Gaza Strip.¹⁸²

The IDF’s clearing operation in the northern Gaza Strip did not initially defeat Hamas there. Defeat occurs when an enemy force has “temporarily or permanently lost the physical means or the will to fight” and can no longer accomplish its mission.¹⁸³ Hamas’ units in January 2024 could still accomplish the group’s mission, however, which is to survive the current war by defeating the Israeli will to continue the war and to rebuild support for the Palestinian cause. An

unspecified Israeli intelligence officer told *The Economist* on December 30 that IDF action had destroyed most of Hamas’ command-and-control network and that Hamas was no longer “operating as a military organization.”¹⁸⁴ The officer caveated that Hamas’ fighters continued to fight an insurgency throughout the Strip. This insurgency could have still accomplished Hamas’ immediate mission, which is to survive the war and degrade international support for Israel.¹⁸⁵

Israel shifted to a new phase of “targeted raids” and the establishment of a security buffer zone within the northern Gaza Strip in early January before Israeli forces were able to fully defeat Hamas.¹⁸⁶ Israel has exploited Hamas’ degradation during the clearing operations by conducting a series of subsequent operations above and below ground designed to defeat Hamas’ military wing. Israeli forces no longer maintained a permanent presence in the northern Strip in January 2024, though major operations did not end in the southern Strip until April 2024.¹⁸⁷ The IDF did establish the Netzarim Corridor in early 2024.¹⁸⁸ This corridor began to isolate Hamas units above ground while IDF engineers destroyed tunnels running under the corridor to isolate Hamas units below ground. The isolation of these units combined with intense IDF raids in the northern Strip in the first half of 2024 began to accelerate Hamas’ degradation as a conventional military force.

Hamas’ fighters continued to fight an insurgency throughout the Strip. This insurgency could have still accomplished Hamas’ immediate mission, which is to survive the war and degrade international support for Israel.

Hamas remained intransigent in negotiations through late winter and spring 2024 and has not changed the main components of its negotiating position since December 2023 as of September 2024.¹⁸⁹ These main components include a full Israeli withdrawal and the release of many Palestinian prisoners. Egypt, the United States, and Qatar each sought to end the war through

ceasefire negotiations during the first half of 2024.¹⁹⁰ Israel remained committed to seeking a short-term ceasefire that secured hostage releases but enabled the IDF to resume operations after the end of a pause.¹⁹¹ The United States sought to forestall an Israeli operation into Rafah, where over a million Gazans had retreated for shelter after being displaced by fighting elsewhere in the Strip.¹⁹² US efforts failed on May 6 when Hamas accepted a “counterproposal” unofficially altered by the Egyptian intelligence chief for Palestine that secured Hamas’ core demand, a permanent end to the fighting, to which Israel had not agreed and would not agree.¹⁹³

Hamas’ Road to Defeat

Hamas will almost certainly survive this war, but Israeli military operations have—at minimum—severely degraded the group’s ability to function as a political and military entity in the Gaza Strip. The elements of Hamas that survive this war will not resemble a military organization, but instead small, disparate cells attempting to reestablish a conventional military organization without the necessary space in which to train or build that force. Several conditions have likely contributed to Hamas’ losses over the last several months. These include the Rafah operation, several major IDF re-clearing operations, sustained Israeli action along the Netzarim Corridor, and Israel’s campaign of targeted strikes against senior and mid-level civil and military officials within Hamas. All of these efforts generate only temporary conditions, however, and it will be necessary to sustain Hamas’ degradation—or even its defeat—in order to create a lasting peace. Targeted strikes, for example, have probably created temporary paralysis among Hamas military and civilian leaders. This is best exemplified by the lack of Hamas internal security forces, who have recently disappeared from the streets to avoid Israeli strikes.¹⁹⁴ These conditions will only persist as long as the strikes do. Hamas will continue to try to reconstitute unless it is destroyed, and Hamas will not necessarily reconstitute in the same way it has historically, nor will it necessarily attempt to generate the same capabilities it had on October 6.

Hamas has been confident that it will survive the war, which has made it extremely intransigent in ceasefire negotiations. Sinwar, for example, assessed in February 2024 amid reports of Hamas resuming governance activities that his military forces could absorb a Rafah operation and that these forces were doing “fine.”¹⁹⁵ Hamas derived this confidence from the situation it observed on the ground in early 2024. The Israeli troop drawdown that began in late 2023 allowed Hamas to again strengthen its grip over the Palestinian population because the IDF had neither secured the area nor replaced Hamas with a new governing authority. Hamas began rebuilding its governing authority as early as January 2024, when, as an Israeli analyst and former government official noted, Hamas began “policing in northern Gaza and governing trade,” only a few weeks after the first large-scale departure of five IDF brigades on December 29.¹⁹⁶ A continued IDF presence would probably have prevented Hamas’ governance apparatus from reemerging, given that the IDF would have detained or killed Hamas’ political operatives had the IDF remained in the area. The IDF arrested two hospital directors for cooperating with Hamas, for example.¹⁹⁷

The group’s confidence very likely continued to grow through the remainder of spring 2024, spurred in part by the Israeli decision to withdraw the bulk of its remaining forces from the Strip on April 7.¹⁹⁸ This drawdown left only one to two brigades in the Strip until the Rafah operation began in early May.¹⁹⁹ Hamas’ intransigence in negotiations throughout 2024 illustrates the fact that Hamas senior leaders do not believe Israeli operations and US-Israeli diplomatic maneuvers will destroy it. Hamas’ negotiating position has not meaningfully changed since December 2023, when it began articulating its own political end state for the war.²⁰⁰ Notably, Hamas’ negotiating position did change slightly in early July, after the Israelis had conducted several major clearing operations in rapid succession.²⁰¹ This change will be discussed in greater detail below.

The fact that Hamas “accepted” a counterproposal ceasefire agreement on May 6 knowing well that Israel would reject the counterproposal suggests Hamas did not fear a Rafah operation and may in fact have welcomed a major Rafah operation as a way to further

Defeat vs. Destroy vs. Degrade: Defining Military Effects

Defeat, Destroy, and Degrade are each terms of military art with specific definitions. In the context of this war, defeating Hamas' military wing is the minimum requirement for the creation of a political entity to replace Hamas in the Gaza Strip. This is because if the IDF fails to defeat Hamas' military wing, Hamas will be able to intimidate new Gazan government officials and prevent them from effectively controlling the Strip or replacing Hamas. Merely degrading Hamas is insufficient to create long-term safety and security for Israel.

The Department of Defense defines degrade as a strategic effect term. A degraded force or asset is “characterized by degeneration of structure or function.”²⁰² It is a temporary effect whereby a unit's losses seriously impede its ability to continue executing assigned missions while the unit remains able to operate.²⁰³

Defeat occurs when an enemy force yields to “the friendly commander's will and can no longer interfere to a significant degree with the actions of friendly forces.”²⁰⁴ A defeated force “has temporarily or permanently lost the physical means or the will to fight.”²⁰⁵ A friendly force can generate two different effects to achieve defeat. A friendly commander can cause the enemy commander to “lose the physical means to continue fighting” or the friendly commander can cause the enemy to “lose the will to fight... [and] become mentally exhausted” with morale so low that the enemy force can no longer accomplish their missions.²⁰⁶ The key difference between defeat and destroy is that defeat is not focused on pure physical destruction. Israel is in the process of defeating Hamas through both physical and psychological effects. Defeat, like degrade, is a temporary effect. Hamas would be able to slowly recover from a defeat, given the resources and time to do so.

Destruction of an enemy force occurs when that force is physically rendered “combat ineffective until it is reconstituted.” This means that to physically “destroy a combat [organization]” the friendly force must “damage [the enemy force] so badly that it cannot perform any function or be restored to a usable condition without being entirely rebuilt.”²⁰⁷ Destroying an enemy force is a much more time- and resource-intensive activity than merely defeating an enemy force, but destruction achieves a much more permanent effect. Fully rebuilding a destroyed force—even with the requisite resources and expertise—could take years.

damage Israel's regional and international position or as a gambit to trigger wider escalation from the Axis of Resistance against Israel.²⁰⁸ Israeli officials have assessed throughout the war that Sinwar may have calculated that expanding the war was and is in his interest.²⁰⁹ Hamas—if it feared its destruction by Israel—would presumably agree to a shorter, six-week ceasefire that would allow it to rest, recuperate, and prepare for a new round of fighting. The IDF—seeking to both achieve its war aims and to apply renewed military pressure to Hamas—launched its Rafah operation on May 6-7.

The operation began with three IDF brigades moving east to west from Kerem Shalom towards the Rafah border crossing.²¹⁰ The IDF rapidly advanced westwards along the Philadelphi Corridor to control the Egyptian border and prevent Hamas from regaining access to smuggling

lines. The IDF reached the Gazan Coast on June 7 and said that it established “operational control” of the corridor.²¹¹ Seizure of the corridor and adequate long-term control mechanisms over it is crucial to defeating Hamas and preventing it from reconstituting. The importance of this corridor will be explored in greater detail below. The IDF has defeated the Rafah Brigade, but Hamas units in Rafah and across the Strip will likely reconstitute absent Israeli or other competent forces interdicting supplies bound for Hamas smuggled under the Philadelphi Corridor.²¹²

Reconstitution is an incredibly resource-intensive and time-intensive process for even a well-functioning military force, and Hamas' military wing is no longer well-functioning. Reconstitution has two basic elements: reorganization and regeneration. Reorganization

is a less-time-intensive process that “includes actions to shift resources within an attrited unit to increase unit combat effectiveness,” and it can be conducted without removing the unit from combat.²¹³ Hamas has almost certainly undertaken this process throughout the Strip. Regeneration is a much more time- and resource-intensive process that requires “large-scale replacement of personnel, equipment, and supplies,” over days to weeks.²¹⁴ It frequently requires a “designated regeneration site after the unit disengages from combat operations.”²¹⁵ Hamas has undertaken some of the less resource-intensive elements of regeneration, but it does not appear to have systematically regenerated across the Strip. Undertaking these activities in the systematic way required to rebuild Hamas’ military would be extremely difficult—if not impossible—while Israel retains the ability to strike Hamas targets across the Strip.

Hamas had very likely reconstituted to a minimally combat effective level in some areas of the northern Gaza Strip in spring 2024, based on discoveries that the IDF made during later raids there. The IDF and unspecified senior Israeli officials told the IDF’s semi-official media arm, Israeli Army Radio, that the IDF “recognized” an effort by Hamas to recruit new fighters and that the group was attempting to rebuild its military organization.²¹⁶ The IDF said that Hamas’ reconstitution effort was particularly obvious in the northern Gaza Strip and Khan Younis, where the IDF did not regularly operate. Hamas operations in Jabalia in May 2024, for example, exemplified the way in which the group remained tactically competent despite its losses. Hamas units in Jabalia attempted to disrupt Israeli ground lines of communication east of Jabalia, indicating that Hamas commanders were able to issue orders and then subordinate commands remained capable of executing them.²¹⁷ An IDF officer also called Hamas in Jabalia “bold” and “hardcore,” suggesting that these fighters retained some level of cohesion while defending against IDF operations.²¹⁸ The IDF operation in Jabalia confronted three Hamas battalion-sized formations and engaged in the “fiercest fighting” of the war, according to one IDF officer.²¹⁹ This suggests that between December 2023, when the Israeli defense minister said that the IDF had “dismantled” Hamas units in Jabalia,

and May 2024, Hamas’ forces in the area had reconstituted and were prepared to again defend against an Israeli assault.²²⁰

Hamas has also undertaken other reconstitution tasks that will make destroying the group rapidly more difficult for the IDF. Israeli Army Radio reported that the IDF “recognized” that Hamas was rebuilding small weapons production workshops using unexploded Israeli ordinance for raw materials.²²¹ The IDF believes that about 2,000-3,000 Israeli bombs dropped in the Gaza Strip did not explode, though unspecified weapons experts and an Israeli intelligence officer assessed the number could be between 5,000 and 7,500 bombs.²²² Hamas has established most of these workshops in the al Mawasi humanitarian zone, making it more difficult for Israel to strike or otherwise eliminate the sites. IDF strikes that kill Hamas weapons experts will dampen the group’s ability to manufacture weapons over time, but the IDF acknowledged in June that “[under] a prolonged lull in the fighting as part of a [ceasefire] deal, Hamas would be able to restore its [weapons] production.”²²³ Israel has degraded Hamas, but the war cannot continue forever and Israeli tactical successes will need to be cemented through additional strategic measures that can achieve victory.

Hamas’ emphasis on subterranean warfare has also made it more difficult for the IDF to rapidly destroy the group. Hamas’ massive tunnel system under the Gaza Strip acts as a force multiplier for Hamas that its forces have used very effectively after Israeli forces drew down in the northern Strip. Hamas has both tactical tunnels for maneuver and strategic or operational tunnels to transport supplies and other materiel in the Strip.²²⁴ Tactical tunnels enabled Hamas to assume a mobile defense in which Hamas units in contact with the IDF could rapidly withdraw to more defensible or previously IDF-cleared areas to attack the IDF from unexpected directions. Destroying these tunnels during large raids has likely prevented Hamas from executing its tactics effectively and has forced many of its fighters above ground again, where they are more easily killed or captured. Operational tunnels, such as the massive tunnel discovered near Erez Crossing in December 2023 or the large tunnels connecting the northern and southern Strip under the Netzarim

Corridor, could be used to transport supplies and troops rapidly.²²⁵ The destruction of these tunnels by IDF engineers has likely isolated some Hamas tactical tunnel networks and units, thereby preventing their resupply.

The IDF used several large, brigade- and division-sized raids in the Strip as a way to disrupt reconstitution and destroy Hamas' subterranean network.²²⁶ The IDF raids targeted most of the northern Gaza Strip, with IDF forces entering some neighborhoods repeatedly. Hamas' reconstitution was the proximate trigger for many of the larger raids, such as raids into al Shifa Hospital in March 2024, Jabalia in May 2024, and Shujaiya in June-July 2024.²²⁷ May through July saw the largest number of Hamas attacks targeting the IDF during 2024, but these raids have clearly disrupted reconstitution and degraded Hamas. Attack rates in areas that the IDF raided repeatedly gradually dropped with each subsequent raid, suggesting Hamas was less capable during each subsequent IDF incursion. The number of Hamas attacks in Zaytoun targeting the IDF, for example, dropped from 92 attacks over 8 days in February 2024 to 10 attacks in 7 days in May 2024 and then finally to only 9 attacks in 14 days in June 2024.²²⁸ These raids, despite their short-term success, are insufficient to prevent Hamas' reconstitution, though the raids can disrupt reconstitution and possibly temporarily defeat Hamas.

The IDF ground forces' campaign against Hamas' battalions and brigades and the Air Force's campaign against Hamas' mid-ranking military commanders are likely preventing Hamas from undertaking coherent military campaigns in the Gaza Strip. Israeli officers said in June that Hamas commanders in Rafah still gave orders, but none of the subordinate units were able to receive and execute the orders in a timely manner.²²⁹ The ground operations destroy tunnel systems that Hamas elements use to maneuver around the battlefield and kill enemy fighters, while the IDF Air Force's targeted strikes temporarily impair command and control and create paralysis as commanders hide to evade targeting or junior Hamas commanders lose contact with higher headquarters. IDF officials have repeatedly noted that Hamas is no longer fighting as a cohesive organization, but instead as small, individual groups of fighters engaging Israeli forces. These

small groups know the ground on which they fight, and they can engage in opportunistic running battles. These groups cannot sustain a mutually supporting and coordinated fight against the IDF without direction from higher headquarters, however.

Hamas attack patterns and mounting anecdotal indicators demonstrate that Hamas' military forces are no longer sustaining a coordinated fight against the IDF. Hamas conducted effective and coordinated operations in Jabalia in both January and May 2024. Hamas units in January 2024 conducted attacks targeting IDF units in eastern Jabalia that appeared to be attempts to prevent IDF armor from moving further east, and Hamas deliberately defended against the IDF in Jabalia in May 2024.²³⁰ The experiences in Jabalia contrast sharply with Hamas operations in Zaytoun and in Khan Younis City later in the summer. Hamas attacks in Zaytoun alternate between hit-and-run engagements and indirect fire, and do not appear to be part of a coherent military campaign. Meanwhile, in Khan Younis in late July, the IDF faced little resistance when it advanced into eastern Khan Younis for re-clearing operations.²³¹ Hamas can kill and maim Israeli soldiers, but Hamas does not appear capable of defending against Israeli maneuvers or delaying Israeli advances.

The IDF, presumably recognizing the long-term insufficiency of the raid model, has coupled the raids with other measures to interdict Hamas' supplies and degrade Hamas. Israeli forces first seized the Netzarim Corridor, which enabled the IDF to interdict Hamas supplies flowing from the south into the northern Strip, where Hamas maintained its strongest fighting formations.²³² The IDF began building the Netzarim Corridor in February 2024 and then expanded the Corridor's width from 2km to 4km on July 2, 2024.²³³ The Netzarim Corridor enables the IDF to interdict Hamas supplies moving through north-south tunnels into Gaza City. The IDF has destroyed several north-south tunnels under the Netzarim that Hamas used to move fighters and equipment from the southern Strip into Gaza City, including one major, 10km-long tunnel in February 2024 and another "strategic tunnel" in August 2024.²³⁴ The destruction of these tunnels isolates Hamas units in Gaza City, which will make them less effective as

they run short of ammunition and supplies.

The IDF followed up the development of the Netzarim Corridor with the seizure of the Philadelphi Corridor in late May, which could allow the IDF to transition from tactical and operational successes in degrading Hamas units to a strategic success in maintaining Hamas' degradation or defeat. Hamas' control over the Gaza Strip-Egypt border allowed it to build massive tunnels underneath the border capable of taking through large trucks that could transport significant quantities of weapon systems to the group.²³⁵ Hamas would almost certainly attempt to rebuild its tunnel systems to replace those the IDF has destroyed along the corridor unless the IDF or another capable force maintains a presence on the Corridor and prevents Hamas from building new tunnels. The Philadelphi Corridor is critical to the accomplishment of Israeli objectives, because if Israel does not control the Corridor, Hamas will rebuild. A rebuilt Hamas would almost certainly initiate another war in the future.

IDF operations could defeat Hamas' military organization over the next several months if IDF operations are sustained. Defeat is a military state in which a friendly force disrupts or nullifies the enemy commander's plan and overcomes their will to fight, thus making them unwilling or unable to pursue their adopted course of action and forcing them to yield to the friendly commander's will.²³⁶ This requires the application of sufficient resources to affect the enemy commander's mind or the capabilities of the enemy force relative to the friendly force or the terrain. The IDF has destroyed large amounts of Hamas infrastructure and equipment, limiting the core capabilities of Hamas (such as maneuver through tunnels) relative to the IDF and to the terrain that Hamas must defend. Other Hamas elements that are no longer conducting tactically sound maneuvers and are unable to meaningfully defend key areas are beginning to yield to the IDF's will. Hamas units in Khan Younis, for example, only lightly defended certain areas during recent IDF operations.²³⁷

Both degradation and defeat are temporary military effects, however, and Israel and its partners must sustain both the degradation and defeat of Hamas' military forces. Hamas will be determined to rebuild itself after this war regardless of the condition it finds itself on the day

after. Some Hamas units are already attempting to rebuild themselves, though they will likely be unable to rebuild themselves to a level that would enable the group to threaten Israeli citizens for some time. Israeli security officials recently reported that Hamas has recruited about 3,000 new recruits in the northern Strip, for example.²³⁸ These new recruits are not trained and will be poorly equipped while the IDF continues to destroy Hamas weapons stockpiles and interdict Hamas resupply. Training requires extensive amounts of secure terrain to be successful, and the new recruits will need commanders to lead them. The IDF, if present in the Strip, can deny access to secure terrain and eliminate commanders. Maintaining the temporary effects of defeat and degradation by interdicting supply and disrupting Hamas' reconstitution through the Philadelphi and Netzarim Corridors will enable the IDF to set conditions for Hamas' destruction as a military and political entity.

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Israeli military operations have not and most likely will not destroy Hamas as a political force, but the level of degradation Hamas' political wing has experienced so far means that there will be an opening that Israel and its partners could exploit. The severity of the damage that Hamas' military wing has sustained means that there will be an opening for alternative political groups to undermine and overthrow Hamas while it is weak. Israeli military operations, while unlikely to destroy Hamas' political wing, can severely degrade it and provide additional opportunities for alternative political groups to exploit. Israeli airstrikes targeting Hamas civil leaders, for example, have forced Hamas police off the streets for fear of elimination.²³⁹ This suggests that in some areas, Hamas' political wing is already defeated given that these police forces can no

longer execute their task—maintaining Hamas' control—and are yielding to the IDF's will.

Defeating Hamas in the Gaza Strip does not mean other groups are also defeated, however. Hamas is only one of nearly a dozen groups that are currently fighting the Israelis. Hamas is currently leading the fight. Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad—a smaller Islamist group closely aligned with Iran—often fund and support the other groups fighting the Israelis. PIJ, the largest and most capable organization outside of Hamas, has sustained some damage but it is probably not severely degraded or destroyed. PIJ is unlikely to take government for itself, however, given its ideological opposition to directly assuming a governing role. PIJ could instead work through a secular or technocratic government that would turn a blind eye to PIJ's military activities.²⁴⁰ It is entirely possible that Iran will prioritize funding PIJ's activities in the Gaza Strip after the war as a better alternative to Hamas. Losing control of the Gaza Strip would be a serious strategic setback for Hamas, therefore, even if its ideology remains intact and its remnants or successors continue to threaten Israel at a lower level.

Israeli control over the Philadelphi Corridor, as well as a longer-term effort to eliminate Hamas' remnants, will be required to continue to prevent Hamas' reconstitution. It is far from clear that a future Hamas will look anything like the Hamas that breached the Israeli border on October 7, 2023. Hamas' surviving military commanders will have learned from the failure of this war and alter their approach to improve Hamas' likelihood of success in the future. Hamas' reconstitution may not even take place in the Gaza Strip, for example. It could occur in the West Bank, a theater that Iran and Hamas have increasingly prioritized over the last several years.²⁴¹

Israel must, nevertheless, develop a political endstate to sustain the success of Israel's military operations. There is no guarantee that alternative groups replacing Hamas will be more desirable than Hamas. The severity of the damage Hamas has sustained means that there will be an opening for alternative political groups to undermine and overthrow Hamas while it is weak. It does not follow that these alternatives will be inherently better than Hamas. Israel and its partners must

influence the political scene in the Gaza Strip in order to support alternatives that are opposed to the destructive vision of Hamas and its allies. Israel and its partners cannot introduce a new government without protecting it or defeating Hamas, and the establishment and consolidation of a new government will take considerable time.

Hamas' Political Maneuvering and Ceasefire Talks in Summer 2024

Israel's current negotiating position—which is supported by the United States—could cause Hamas to suffer a serious strategic setback, if an eventual ceasefire mirrored Israel's position. The ceasefire deal will not on its own accomplish Netanyahu's war aims, however. Israel's current position aims to establish an Israeli presence along the Philadelphi Corridor, return the hostages, and ensure that the most dangerous Palestinian prisoners held in Israel are released into exile. The ceasefire provides Israel the tools it requires to maintain Hamas' degradation, but it does not provide a clear political end state that would accomplish Netanyahu's war aims. Hamas, for its part, almost certainly recognizes that a ceasefire or de-facto end to the conflict along the current lines would severely inhibit its reconstitution.

Neither the United States nor Israel have articulated a political end state that will accomplish Netanyahu's stated war aims. These war aims are destroying Hamas, demilitarizing the Gaza Strip, and deradicalizing Palestinian society.²⁴² The United States has suggested that it and Israel could create a non-Hamas, non-Israeli governing authority if Israel immediately ended the war.²⁴³ Hamas would violently resist a non-Hamas government backed by Israel, however. It is unclear how the Biden Administration plans to defend a new governing authority from Hamas without a long-term security presence involving a lengthy transitional period. Israel, for its part, has not set a political end state in the Gaza Strip, which makes it difficult for military commanders to design military operations to successfully meet political ends. Military action should always be designed and executed with a defined political end state to guide military operations and avoid actions that will undermine the successful achievement of the political end state.

Hamas is manipulating the Israeli public to degrade Israeli will and force the Israelis to capitulate to Hamas' demands. Hamas executed six Israeli hostages after filming a series of videos in which the hostages—under duress—called for Netanyahu to agree to a ceasefire.²⁴⁴ The execution of the hostages sparked massive protests in support of a ceasefire agreement and against the Netanyahu government.²⁴⁵ Acquiescing to the protesters' demands would require Netanyahu to agree to Hamas' ceasefire demands, given Hamas' repeated unwillingness to compromise and move towards Israel's position. Israel's capitulation to Hamas' ceasefire demands—which include a full Israeli withdrawal—would mean an Israeli defeat because Hamas' ceasefire demands are designed to benefit Hamas by enabling the group to reconstitute.

Hamas' senior leaders—including Sinwar and his deputy and chief negotiator Khalil al Hayya—likely intend to delay serious negotiations in the hope that political conditions will change and force the Israelis to capitulate. Multiple regional and local factors could be driving Sinwar's calculations. First, Sinwar has hoped since October that the high-intensity conflict in the Gaza Strip would spread throughout the region, with Iranian allies attacking Israel from multiple directions.²⁴⁶ Sinwar may have hoped after Israel killed Ismail Haniyeh that a massive Iranian strike would plunge the region into a wider war, thus providing a renewed opportunity to destroy Israel. Second, Sinwar—who spent years learning about and understanding Israeli society—recognizes that the hostages he holds can be used as political weapons to degrade Israeli will and force Netanyahu's hand to agree to a ceasefire.²⁴⁷ It is notable in this context that the 2023 judicial protests in Israel were one of the factors that drove Iran and Hamas to see Israel as a weak state that could be destroyed and its people expelled. Hamas and its allies almost certainly view the protests in support of a ceasefire in the same light, believing that Israel is too weak to hold out against unrelenting political and psychological pressure.

Hamas and Iran may decide to prioritize other fronts over the Gaza Strip in the aftermath of this war. Senior Iranian military officials, for example, have repeatedly emphasized the importance of the West Bank, while IRGC-Quds Force elements

have attempted to smuggle weapons and other supplies into the West Bank in order to build Hamas' capabilities.²⁴⁸ Hamas is attempting to craft a Palestinian unity government with Chinese assistance to increase its influence in the Palestinian Authority, though this effort is likely to fail given the total lack of trust between Hamas and its theoretical governing partners. Both Iranian smuggling and Hamas' attempts to forge a unity government are long-running efforts, but the reality of Hamas' severely degraded position in Gaza and the failure of its war against Israel means that both Iran and Hamas may recognize that accomplishing their objective of destroying Israel is not feasible from the Gaza Strip.

The West Bank, for example, offers far more options for both Iran and Hamas. The West Bank contains relatively isolated Israeli settlements that large Hamas elements could eventually attack and overwhelm. It also directly abuts central Israel, and downtown Tel Aviv is only 20km from major West Bank border towns like Qalqilya. The border between the West Bank and Israel is also much longer, requiring larger numbers of forces to secure. The West Bank-Jordan border is also far longer than the Gaza Strip-Egypt border, though Jordan has more effectively controlled its border with the West Bank. Iran is attempting to subvert Jordan's monarchy, however, which could inhibit Jordanian efforts to secure its border with the West Bank over time.²⁴⁹ Iran has not yet smuggled sufficient weapons into the West Bank to make Hamas elements there as deadly as their Gaza Strip counterparts, but smuggling more advanced weapons is clearly becoming an Iranian priority.

An outcome that leaves even Hamas remnants with the ability to rebuild themselves in the Gaza Strip is entirely unacceptable. Other violent Islamist groups, such as Al Qaeda, have reemerged from far more devastating damage than Israel has inflicted upon Hamas. Al Qaeda in Iraq, for example, had 800 fighters in 2010—four years before it would capture Iraq's second-largest city.²⁵⁰ The United States and Iraq had defeated al Qaeda in Iraq by 2010, though they had not destroyed the group. Hamas today retains some senior commanders and political leaders with a vision for Hamas' future, as well as some motivated mid-level commanders who will gradually become the new face of the movement. US intelligence

assessed in late May 2024 that Israel had killed 35% of Hamas' total military force.²⁵¹ Similarly, Hamas' Khan Younis Brigade commander said in a letter to Yahya Sinwar that 50% of his force had become casualties and another 25% had either deserted or was no longer fit for combat. The commander added his force had only 40% of its pre-war small arms and 30-35% of its anti-tank systems.²⁵² Yet, Hamas can replace this damage with time. Ending this war without Hamas' defeat at this stage will leave the group with the ability to rebuild many of the assets it used to launch the October 7 attacks. Hamas could, over several years, rebuild tunnels to smuggle weapons into Gaza and rebuild its control over Gazan society. Destroying Hamas, in contrast, would permanently remove one pressure point the IRGC and Iran have at their disposal for their plans to destroy the Israeli state—if Israel can manage to achieve its aim.

Conclusion

The most effective way to create peace in the Gaza Strip will be to defeat Hamas and replace it with a new governing authority supported by the international community. It would destroy Hamas over time. This will require Israeli military action that renders Hamas' entire military wing—not just a few brigades—unwilling to continue the fight, thereby defeating Hamas as a military organization. Hamas remnants, however, will probably continue to conduct isolated and unorganized attacks, even if the organization writ large loses the will to fight. Israel and/or its allies must provide a new governing authority that is adequately protected by an external military force to sustain a lengthy transition from war to reconstruction and peace. Hamas remnants and other militia groups in the Strip would almost certainly continue to resist this effort, requiring Israel or an external security partner to continue to fight small, isolated militia units during a transitional period while a new, Gazan force is rebuilt from scratch. A new governing authority is the only organization that one could reasonably hope would accomplish Israeli war aims: destroying Hamas, demilitarizing the Gaza Strip, and deradicalizing Palestinian society.²⁵³

The IDF has severely degraded Hamas and

might be able to defeat the group within the next several months, which means that a ceasefire along the terms currently proposed by the Israelis could contain Hamas. Hamas will find it nearly impossible to rebuild to October 6 levels in the Gaza Strip under a ceasefire scenario in which Israel or a trustworthy and capable international force maintains control over the Philadelphi Corridor. The primary condition is control of the Philadelphi, but the ceasefire deal will also ideally prevent Hamas and other Palestinian militia members currently in Israeli jails from returning to the Strip or West Bank. Failing to do this would enable Hamas to acquire new, smarter commanders currently “safe” in Israeli jails. Hamas would still be able to reconstitute to some level even with a deal that interdicts its resupply and prevents experienced commanders from returning to the Strip. The large amount of ordnance dropped on the Strip suggests that Hamas would be able to make a significant number of IEDs or rudimentary rockets, but it is unlikely that Hamas could rebuild a military organization as sophisticated as the one that crossed the border on October 7.

In a most dangerous scenario, international mediators, Israel, and Hamas could reach a ceasefire agreement that requires Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip entirely. This would very likely provide Hamas an opportunity to rebuild to October 7 levels over a long time period. This outcome reduces the extremely destructive October 7 War to just another Israeli effort to mow the grass. Implicit in this course of action is that Israel—with US backing—will once again fight Hamas in the Gaza Strip within the next decade. A future war could threaten Israel's existence to a much greater degree, given that Hamas will almost certainly learn from this war and better coordinate with its allies in the region—mainly Iran, the Houthis, and Hezbollah—to target Israel in major ground and air attacks from multiple directions. These repeated ground attacks are a key element of Iran's strategy to destroy the Israeli state, as argued above.

Failure to prevent Hamas' return and reconstitution will mean that Israel and the United States will need to contend with the threat posed by Hamas and its Iranian backers again in the future. Iran and Hamas are learning lessons from

the current war, and they will apply these lessons in the future to threaten not only Israel but also the United States.²⁵⁴ Iran remains committed to expelling the United States from the Middle East in addition to Iran's commitment to destroying Israel. The United States must not resign itself to "managing" the threat of Hamas. It should support Israel to defeat Hamas, thereby eliminating one group with which Iran can attack Israel. Hamas will remain a threat if it is not destroyed or defeated in this war. It will try to attack Israel again and it will seek to expand its rule to the West Bank at the expense of the current Palestinian Authority.

Iran is continuing to build up its proxies and partners in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, the West Bank, and elsewhere to threaten Israel and to attempt to destroy it. Hamas is an integral part of this Iranian effort.²⁵⁵ Hamas is a local Palestinian organization, but Iran has nursed and accelerated Hamas' growth from a deadly but strategically limited terrorist organization to a military and political force capable of major assaults into Israeli territory. Hamas' survival means that the IDF will need to mass more missile, drone, and rocket interceptors to meet these threats while garrisoning its borders to prevent ground incursions similar to October 7. There is little doubt that Iran and its proxies and partners will launch similar attacks in the future, even if these attacks do not come from the Gaza Strip in the short term. The IRGC views such attacks as the method through which it will destroy Israel. Destroying Hamas would remove one pressure point the IRGC and Iran have at their disposal for their plans to destroy the Israeli state—if Israel can manage to achieve its aim.

Accepting Hamas' current negotiating position is equivalent to an Israeli surrender and would result in Hamas' survival as a political and military entity, which is not an acceptable outcome to this war. The "permanent ceasefire" Hamas keeps demanding would not be permanent. Hamas views any truce as a temporary pause that it can later break for reasons and at a time of its own choosing, and it does not believe that a truly permanent ceasefire is acceptable.²⁵⁶ A ceasefire at this juncture in the war would leave Hamas in place with the tools it needs to reconstitute and launch another war to destroy Israel.

Israel and the United States could make several

decisions that would set conditions to—at minimum—severely diminish Hamas' access to resources and its ability to govern the Strip. The United States and Israel should identify an alternative Palestinian governing authority that could provide minimally acceptable civil services, which would undermine Hamas by providing an alternative vision for the Gaza Strip. The United States and others could also use this authority to facilitate aid and reconstruction. Simultaneously, an external security force would need to protect this governing authority to prevent Hamas from destroying it. Hamas will violently resist any authority that excludes it by assassinating civil servants and political leaders. An external security force must be large enough with proper rules of engagement and equipment to protect an emerging new government and new local security forces. Finally, Israel and its allies should control the Gaza Strip-Egypt border to prevent the escape of senior Hamas leaders, the arrival of new or advanced weapons, and the resupply of Hamas from outside the Gaza Strip.

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