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Israel Is Losing this War

Despite the violence it has unleashed on Palestinians, Israel is failing to achieve its political goals.

TONY KARON and DANIEL LEVY



Israeli forces invade Gaza. (IDF)

It may sound daft to suggest that a group of armed irregulars, numbering in the low tens of thousands, besieged and with little access to advanced weaponry, is a match for one of the world's most powerful militaries, backed and armed by the United States. And yet, an increasing number of establishment strategic analysts warn that Israel could lose this war on Palestinians despite the cataclysmic violence it unleashed since the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7. And in provoking the Israeli assault, Hamas may be realizing many of its own political objectives.

Both Israel and Hamas appear to be resetting the terms of their political contest not to the pre-October 7 status quo, but to the 1948 one. It's not clear what comes next, but there will be no going back to the previous state of affairs.

The surprise attack neutralized Israeli military installations, breaking open the gates of the world's largest open-air prison and leading a gruesome rampage in which some 1,200 Israelis, at least 845 of them civilians, were killed. The shocking ease with which Hamas breached Israeli lines around the Gaza Strip reminded many of the 1968 Tet Offensive. Not literally—there are vast differences between a US expeditionary war in a distant land and Israel's war to defend an occupation at home, waged by a citizen army motivated by a sense of existential peril. Instead, the usefulness of the analogy lies in the political logic shaping an insurgent offensive.

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In 1968, the Vietnamese revolutionaries lost the battle and sacrificed much of the underground political and military infrastructure they had patiently built over years. Yet the Tet Offensive was a key moment in their defeat of the United States—albeit at a massive cost in Vietnamese lives. By simultaneously staging dramatic, high-profile attacks on more than 100 targets across the country on a single day, lightly armed Vietnamese guerrillas shattered the illusion of success that was being peddled to the US public by the Johnson administration. It signaled to Americans that the war for which they were being asked to sacrifice tens of thousands of their sons was unwinnable.

The Vietnamese leadership measured the impact of its military actions by their political effects rather than by conventional military measures such as men and materiel lost or territory gained. Thus Henry Kissinger's 1969 lament: "We fought a military war; our opponents fought a political one. We sought physical attrition; our opponents aimed for our psychological exhaustion. In the process we lost sight of one of the cardinal maxims of guerrilla war: The guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win."

That logic has Jon Alterman of the not-exactly-dovish Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., to see Israel as being at considerable risk of losing to Hamas:

Hamas's concept of military victory...is all about driving long-term political outcomes. Hamas sees victory not in one year or five, but from engaging with decades of struggle that increase Palestinian solidarity and increase Israel's isolation. In this scenario, Hamas rallies a besieged population in Gaza around it in anger and helps collapse the Palestinian Authority government by ensuring Palestinians see it even more as a feckless adjunct to Israeli military authority. Meanwhile, Arab states move strongly away from normalization, the Global South aligns strongly with the Palestinian cause, Europe recoils at the Israeli army's excesses, and an American debate erupts over Israel, destroying the bipartisan support Israel has enjoyed here since the early 1970s.

Hamas, [Alterman writes](#), seeks "to use Israel's far greater strength to defeat Israel. Israel's strength allows the country to kill Palestinian civilians, destroy Palestinian infrastructure, and defy global calls for restraint. All those things advance Hamas's war aims."

Such warnings have been ignored by the Biden administration and Western leaders, whose [unconditional embrace of Israel's war](#) is rooted in the delusion that Israel was just another Western nation peacefully going about its business before it suffered an unprovoked attack on October 7—it's a comforting fantasy to those who prefer to avoid recognizing a reality they've been complicit in creating.

Forget "intelligence failures"; Israel's failure to anticipate October 7 was a political failure to understand the consequences of a violent system of oppression that leading international and Israeli human rights organizations have branded as apartheid.

Twenty years ago, former Knesset Speaker Avrum Burg warned of the inevitability of violent backlash. "It turns out that the 2,000-year struggle for Jewish survival comes down to a state of settlements, run by an amoral clique of corrupt lawbreakers who are deaf both to their citizens and to their enemies. A state lacking justice cannot survive," he wrote in [The International Herald Tribune](#).

Even if the Arabs lower their heads and swallow their shame and anger forever, it won't work. A structure built on human callousness will inevitably collapse in on itself.... Israel, having ceased to care about the children of the Palestinians, should not be surprised when they come washed in hatred and blow themselves up in the centers of Israeli escapism.

Israel could kill 1,000 Hamas men a day and solve nothing, Burg warned, because Israel's own violent actions would be the source of a replenishing of their ranks. His warnings have been ignored, even as they've been vindicated many times over. That same logic is now playing out on steroids in the destruction being visited

Gaza. The grinding structural violence Israel expected Palestinians to suffer in silence meant that Israeli security was always illusory.

The weeks since October 7 have affirmed that there can be no return to the status quo ante. This was likely Hamas's goal in staging its deadly attacks. And even prior to this, many in Israel's leadership were openly calling for the completion of the Nakba, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine; now those voices have been amplified.

Late November's mutually agreed humanitarian pause saw Hamas release some hostages in exchange for Palestinians held in Israeli jails and an increase in humanitarian supplies entering Gaza. When Israel resumed its military onslaught and Hamas returned to launching rockets, it was clear that Hamas has not been militarily defeated. The mass slaughter and destruction Israel has wrought in Gaza suggests an intention to make the territory uninhabitable for the 2.2 million Palestinians who live there—and to push for expulsion via a militarily engineered humanitarian catastrophe. Indeed, the IDF's own estimate is that it has so far eliminated less than 15 percent of Hamas's fighting force. This in a campaign that has killed more than 21,000 Palestinians, mostly civilians, 8,600 of them children.

October 7 and Palestinian politics

Israel's military will almost certainly oust Hamas from governing Gaza. But analysts such as Tareq Baoni, who has studied the movement and its thinking over the past two decades, argue that it has sought for quite some time to break out of the shackles of governing a territory sectioned off from the rest of Palestine, on terms set by the occupying power.

Hamas has long shown a desire to break out of its Gaza governance role, from the mass unarmed March of Return protests in 2018 violently suppressed by Israeli sniper fire to efforts thwarted by the United States and Israel to transfer governance of Gaza to either a reformed Palestinian Authority, agreed-upon technocrats, or an elected government, while it focused on refocusing Palestinian politics in both Gaza and the West Bank on resistance to, rather than custodianship of, the occupation status quo. If a consequence of its attack were losing the responsibility for governing Gaza, Hamas might see that as advantageous.

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Hamas has tried to nudge Fatah onto a similar path, urging the ruling party in the West Bank to end Palestinian Authority (PA) security collaboration with Israel and more directly confront the occupation. Losing municipal control of Gaza is therefore far from a decisive defeat for Hamas's war effort: For a movement dedicated to

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liberating Palestinian lands, governing Gaza had begun to look like a dead end, much as permanent limited self-governance in discontinuous islands of the West Bank has been for Fatah.

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Hamas, Baconi says, likely felt compelled to take a high-stakes gamble to shatter a status quo it deemed a slow death for Palestine. “All this still does not mean that Hamas’s strategic shift will be deemed successful in the long run,” he wrote in *Foreign Policy*.

Hamas’s violent disruption of the status quo might well have provided Israel with an opportunity to carry out another Nakba. This might result in a regional conflagration or deal Palestinians a blow that could take a generation to recover from. What is certain, however, is that there is no return to what existed before.

Hamas’s gambit, then, may have been to sacrifice municipal governance of a besieged Gaza to cement its status as a national resistance organization. Hamas is not trying to bury Fatah: The various unity agreements between Hamas and Fatah, particularly those led by prisoners of both factions, demonstrate that Hamas seeks a united front. The PA is unable to protect West Bank Palestinians from the increasing violence of Israeli settlements and entrenched control, let alone to meaningfully respond to the bloodshed in Gaza. Under the cover of Western backing on Gaza, Israel has killed hundreds of Palestinians, arrested thousands, and displaced entire villages on the West Bank, all the while escalating its state-sponsored settler attacks. In so doing, Israel has further undermined Fatah among the population and pushed it in the direction of Hamas.

For years, settlers protected by the IDF have attacked Palestinian villages with the aim of forcing their residents to leave and tightening Israel’s illegal grip on the occupied territory—but the expansion of this since October 7 is causing even Israel’s US accomplices to blanch. Biden’s threat of visa bans against settlers involved in violence against West Bank Palestinians is an evasion: Those settlers are far from individual rogue actors; they are armed by the state and aggressively protected by the IDF and the Israeli legal system, because they are implementing a state policy. But even Biden’s miscast threat makes clear that Israel is at odds with his administration.

Hamas has a pan-Palestinian perspective, not a Gaza-specific one, and so it intended October 7 to have transformative effects across Palestine. During the 2021 “Unity Intifada” that sought to connect the struggles of Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza with those inside Israel, Hamas took actions in support of that goal. Now, the Israeli state is accelerating that connection with a paranoid campaign of repression against any expression of dissent from among its Palestinian citizens. Hundreds of Palestinians in the West Bank have been detained, including activists and teens posting on Facebook. Israel is all too aware of the potential for escape 

in the West Bank. In that sense, the Israeli response has only brought the people of the West Bank and Gaza closer.

It's clear Israel never intended to accept a sovereign Palestinian state anywhere west of the Jordan River. Instead, Israel is intensifying long-standing plans for securing its control of the territory. That and growing Israeli encroachment into the Al Aqsa Mosque are a reminder that Israel is actively fueling whatever uprising follows in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and even within the '67 lines.

Ironically, then, the US insistence on the Palestinian Authority's being put in control of Gaza after Israel's war of devastation—and its belated, feeble warnings over settler violence—reinforces the idea of the West Bank and Gaza being a single entity. Israel's 17-year policy of cleaving a pliant West Bank run by a co-opted PA from a “terrorist-run Gaza” has failed.

Israel after October 7

The Hamas-led raid punctured myths of Israeli invincibility and its citizens' expectation of tranquility even as the state chokes the life out of Palestinians. Just weeks earlier, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was boasting that Israel had successfully “managed” the conflict to the point that Palestine no longer featured on his map of a “new Middle East.” With the Abraham Accords and other alliances, some Arab leaders were embracing Israel. The US was promoting the plan, with Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden both focused on “normalization” with Arab regimes that were willing to leave the Palestinians subject to ever-tightening Israeli apartheid. October 7 served up a brutal reminder that this was untenable, and that Palestinians' resistance constitutes a form of veto power over the efforts of others to determine their fate.

It's too soon to measure the impact of October 7 on Israeli domestic politics. It has [made Israelis](#) more hawkish, but at the same time more distrustful of their national leadership after the colossal failure of intelligence and response. It took significant mass mobilization against the government by the families of Israelis held captive in Gaza to achieve a pause in military action and secure a hostage-release deal. Dramatic, high-profile internal dissent over the hostages and what's required of Israel to secure their return could raise pressure for further release deals and even a full-blown cease-fire, despite a determination to continue the war among much of the political and military leadership. Israeli public opinion remains confused, angry, and unpredictable.

Then there's the war's impact on Israel's economy, whose growth model is based on attracting high levels of foreign direct investment to its tech sector and other export industries. Last year's social protest and uncertainty over the constitutional fracas was already being cited as a reason for the 68 percent year-on-year drop in FDI reported over the summer. Israel's war, for which 360,000 reservists have been mobilized, adds a new level of shock. Economist Adam Tooze [wrote in his Substack](#):

The tech lobby in Israel estimates that a tenth of its workforce has been mobilized. Construction is paralyzed by the quarantining of the Palestinian workforce in the West Bank. Consumption of services has collapsed as people stay away from restaurants and public gatherings are limited. Credit card records suggest that private consumption in Israel fell by nearly a third in the days after the war broke out. Spending on leisure and entertainment crashed by 70%. Tourism, a mainstay of the Israeli economy, has come to an abrupt halt. Flights are canceled and shipping cargo diverted. Offshore the Israeli government ordered Chevron to halt production at the Tamar natural gas field, costing Israel \$200 million a month in lost revenue.

Israel is a wealthy country with the resources to weather some of this storm, but with its wealth comes fragility—and it has much to lose.

More on the Israel-Gaza War

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Gaza after October 7

Israeli forces have poured into Gaza with a battle plan, but no clear war plan for Gaza after their invasion. Some Israeli military leaders aim to maintain “security control” of the sort they enjoy in the PA’s West Bank domain. In Gaza, this would pit it against a better-drilled insurgency supported by most of the population. Many [in Israeli government circles](#) advocate forcibly displacing much of Gaza’s civilian population into Egypt, by engineering a humanitarian crisis that makes Gaza unlivable. The US has said it has ruled that out, but no smart gambler would discount the possibility of the Israelis’ seeking forgiveness rather than permission for more mass-scale ethnic cleansing in line with Israel’s long-term demographic goals of reducing the Palestinian population between the river and the sea.

US officials have reached for the prayer books of yore, speaking hopefully of putting 88-year-old Mahmoud Abbas, the head of PA, back in charge of Gaza, with the promise of some renewed pursuit of the chimeric “two-state solution.” But the PA has no credibility even in the West Bank because of its acquiescence to Israel’s ever-expanding occupation. Then, there’s the reality that [preventing genuine Palestinian sovereignty](#) in any part of historic Palestine has long been a point of consensus in the Israeli leadership across most of the Zionist political spectrum. And Israel’s leaders have no need to abide by the expectations of a US administration that may well be voted out next year. And they have a proven ability to wag the dog even if Biden were reelected. The US has chosen to ride shotgun in Israel’s war machine, whose destination may not be clear, but it’s certainly not any kind of Palestinian state.

The global impact of October 7

Israel and the United States may have convinced themselves that the world has “moved on” from the Palestinian plight, but the energies unleashed by the events since October 7 suggest that the opposite is true. Calls for solidarity with Palestine have echoed along the streets of the Arab world, serving in some countries as a coded language of dissent against decrepit authoritarianism. Across the Global South and in the cities of the West, Palestine now occupies a symbolic place as an avatar of rebellion against Western hypocrisy and an unjust postcolonial order. Not since the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq have so many millions around the world taken to the streets to protest. Organized labor has flexed its internationalist muscles to challenge arms deliveries to Israel and reminded itself of its power to change history, and legal mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice, and even US and European courts are being used to challenge government policies that enable Israel’s war crimes.

Panicked by a world aghast at its actions in Gaza, Israel and its advocates have reverted to charges of antisemitism against those who would challenge Israel’s brutality—but everything from the mass marches to the vocal Jewish opposition to the opinion surveys on Biden’s handling of the crisis indicate that equating solidarity with antisemitism is not only factually wrong; it is unconvincing.

Several countries in Latin America and Africa have symbolically cut ties, and the deliberate bombing of a civilian population and preventing access to shelter, food, water, and medical care has left even many of Israel’s allies aghast. The extent of violence the West is willing to countenance against a captive people in Gaza offers the Global South a stark reminder of accounts unsettled with the imperial West. And when French President [Emmanuel Macron](#) and Canadian Prime Minister [Justin Trudeau](#) publicly implore Israel to stop “bombing

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babies,” Israel is in danger of losing even parts of the West. It has become difficult in the short term for Arab and Muslim countries to maintain, much less expand public ties.

Yoking itself to Israel’s response to October 7 has also burst the bubble on US fantasies of reclaiming hegemony in the Global South under a “we’re the good guys” rubric. The contrast between its response to Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestinian crises respectively has produced a consensus that there is hypocrisy at the very heart of US foreign policy, producing such extraordinary spectacles as [Biden being castigated](#), face-to-face at an APEC Summit, by Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim for his failure to stand up against Israel’s atrocities

Ibrahim specifically warned that Biden’s response to Gaza had raised a serious trust deficit with those the United States hopes to court as allies in its competition with Russia and China. Having demonstrated to Arab allies that their Washington patron will side with Israel, even when it is bombing Arab civilians, will likely reinforce the trend of Global South states diversifying their geopolitical portfolios.

The political question

By shattering a status quo that Palestinians find intolerable, Hamas has put politics back on the agenda. Israel has significant military power, but it is politically weak. Much of the US establishment supporting Israel’s war assumes that violence emanating from an oppressed community can be stamped out by applying overwhelming military force against that community. But even [Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin signaled skepticism](#) over that premise, warning that Israel’s attacks killing thousands of civilians risked driving “them into the arms of the enemy [and replacing] a tactical victory with a strategic defeat.”

Western politicians and media like to fantasize that Hamas is an ISIS-style nihilistic cadre holding Palestinian society hostage; Hamas is, in fact, a multifaceted political movement rooted in the fabric and national aspirations of Palestinian society. It embodies a belief, grimly affirmed by decades of Palestinian experience, that armed resistance is central to the Palestinian liberation project because of the failures of the Oslo process and the intractable hostility of its adversary. And its influence and popularity have grown as Israel and its allies keep thwarting a peace process and other nonviolent strategies for pursuing Palestinian liberation.

Israel’s campaign will leave Hamas’s military capacity diminished. But even if it were to kill the organization’s top leaders (as it has done previously), Israel’s response to October 7 is affirming Hamas’s message and its standing among Palestinians across the region and beyond. [Large protests in Jordan with pro-Hamas chants](#), for instance, are unprecedented. It requires no approval or support of the Hamas actions of October 7 to acknowledge the enduring appeal of a movement that seems capable of making Israel pay some kind of a price for the violence it visits upon Palestinians every day, every year, generation after generation.

History also suggests a pattern in which representatives of movements dismissed as “terrorist” by their adversaries—in South Africa, say, or Ireland—nonetheless appear at the negotiating table when the time comes to seek political solutions. It would be ahistorical to bet against Hamas, or at least some version of the political-ideological current it represents, doing the same if and when a political solution between Israel and the Palestinians is revisited with seriousness.

What comes after the horrific violence is far from clear, but Hamas’s October 7 attack has forced a reset of a political contest to which Israel appears unwilling to respond beyond devastating military force against Palestinian civilians. And as things stand eight weeks into the vengeance, Israel can’t be said to be winning. **N**

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