

To Meet the War's Objectives, Controlling Northern Gaza is Essential

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At the current stage of combat, Israel needs a combination of two approaches: (1) achieving full control over the northern Gaza Strip; and (2) hermetically sealing the Philadelphi corridor, which is used for smuggling, as a practical solution to prevent Hamas and other terrorist groups from rearming. Separating northern Gaza from the rest of the Strip, preventing Hamas from recovering, and at the same time, encouraging the emergence of a local leadership that is not afraid of Hamas (because the IDF has military control of the region), coupled with sealing off the smuggling routes, match the goals that the government of Israel set for this war – at least in northern Gaza. These goals include: destroying Hamas' military and governmental capabilities; the release of the Israeli hostages; demilitarizing the area; creating the conditions that will afford the IDF freedom of operation in the Strip; establishing a security zone along the Gaza border; creating the security conditions needed to allow Israelis to return to their homes in the northern western Negev. A hold on northern Gaza could be a bargaining chip in negotiations for the release of the hostages, and its transfer to a responsible and moderate governing body could also be seen as a measure that contributes to the implementation of President Biden's framework for the Middle East: a new regional architecture and normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The goals of the war in the Gaza Strip, as defined by the Israeli government, are to destroy Hamas' governmental and military capabilities, create a new reality in Gaza that prevents Hamas from regain control there, and at the same time brings about the release of all the hostages.

The operational approach has focused on eliminating Hamas' senior leadership; dismantling the organization's armed wing by destroying its chain of command, neutralizing its command and control system, and capturing or killing as many terrorists as possible; destroying Hamas' underground tunnel networks; demolishing the infrastructure used to manufacture, store, and conceal weapons; neutralizing Hamas' civilian mechanisms; and destroying the organization's

institutions and symbols of a sovereign. Israel has made progress, albeit slowly, toward all these goals since the war began – yet a “victory image” remains elusive (if one is even possible). This is mainly due to the difficulty for the IDF in locating and neutralizing Hamas’ three central leaders: Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Deif, and Marwan Issa.

What follows is an assessment of the war’s military achievements, based on information published by the IDF’s Spokesperson’s Unit to mark 100 days of fighting:

- a. The IDF has successfully dismantled Hamas’ operational framework – brigades and battalions – in northern and central Gaza. In total, 17 of Hamas’ 24 battalions have been dismantled, but there are still hundreds if not thousands of terrorists emerging from the tunnels, not only to attack IDF forces but also to show the people of Gaza that Hamas is still very much alive. Hamas also has no problem recruiting a new generation of operatives.
- b. More than 11,000 rockets have been fired into Israeli territory and more than 95 percent of those that threatened to hit targets inside Israel were intercepted by the military’s aerial defense systems.
- c. Israel has attacked and destroyed rocket-launching sites belonging to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but both organizations still have the capability to fire missiles deep into Israeli territory and at the western Negev.
- d. The IDF has killed around 9,000 terrorists in Gaza – including two brigade commanders and 19 battalion commanders – as well as more than 50 company commanders.
- e. Destruction of underground infrastructure and tunnels: The massive network of underground tunnels discovered in Gaza was far more extensive and sophisticated than Israeli intelligence knew in advance. The current assessment is that the tunnels span more than 700 kilometers, with more than 5,700 entry shafts (including under almost every school, mosque, and hospital). The tunnels command a key strategic role for Hamas – protecting its leaders, safeguarding its command and control systems, concealing the hostages, allowing Hamas terrorists to move inside Gaza undetected, even in areas where the IDF already killed most of the terrorists, and serving as infrastructure for launching rocket attacks against Israel. The demolition of the tunnels is a complex mission, which given the extent and complexity of the tunnels entails a high degree of risk for Israeli forces. It will take a long time to complete this mission.

- f. Destroying Hamas' military industry: There are factories for the manufacture of arms and ammunition above and below ground in the Gaza Strip, especially in the refugee camps in central Gaza. Destroying them is vital to ensure that the organization does not rearm in the future.
- g. Destroying Hamas' governmental infrastructure: Hamas' emergency councils, which are responsible for civilian activity in wartime, are still functioning, and it seems that they have regained their strength in northern Gaza, after the IDF withdrew from the northern neighborhoods and the refugee camps.
- h. Civilian control: Due to the Israeli government's refusal to discuss "the day after" Hamas' rule of Gaza, no mechanism for coordinating the civilian effort there has been set up. Members of the international community and pragmatic Arab states refuse to get involved in Gaza again as long as there is no political framework for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well. The United Nations is not preparing an international task force to stabilize and reconstruct Gaza – and the Palestinian Authority, which has shown signs of willingness to take responsibility and remain relevant, is not seen as legitimate by the Israeli government, or by the people of Gaza.
- i. Humanitarian considerations: More of the humanitarian aid that enters Gaza through the Rafah border crossing does not reach its intended target in northern Gaza because Hamas members and criminal elements hijack the trucks as they make their way northward. Without any decision on the implementation of civilian efforts in northern Gaza, there is no apparatus responsible for public order that can ensure that all the aid reaches its intended destination. Similarly, dependence on the United Nations refugee agency, UNWRA, for both shelter for the displaced Gazans and distribution of humanitarian aid (primarily water, food, and medicines) remains a key factor. UNRWA is controlled by Hamas, and most of its employees are affiliated with Hamas. Thus far Israel has presented no alternative to UNRWA.
- j. Political dimension: The government of Israel has postponed any discussion of "the day after" the military campaign against Hamas for internal political, rather than state-related political reasons. Strategic coordination with the United States continues, but there are increasing gaps regarding the role of the "revitalized" Palestinian Authority in governing Gaza, the extent of humanitarian aid needed, prioritization of the release of the hostages over defeat of Hamas' military wing, and the length of time that will be needed for Israel's ground maneuver deep in Gaza. There is a great deal of suspicion from Egypt because of comments from some members of the Israeli government

calling for the Gaza population to be driven southwards into Egypt, as well as the lack of clarity on Israel's intentions vis-à-vis the Philadelphi corridor on the border with Egypt and the Palestinian side of the Rafah crossing.

Israel completed the first stage of its ground offensive in northern Gaza having achieved its goals: dismantling Hamas' rule and the northern brigades of its armed wing, as well as neutralizing terrorist infrastructure and destroying tunnels. At the same time, the reduction in the order of battle in the area (as reservists were sent home) and a hold only over the security perimeter of the area has led to Hamas security elements, especially the civilian police (which, as a civilian entity, was not attacked) starting to operate openly in neighborhoods of Gaza City, towns, and refugee camps in northern Gaza. They are coordinating their operations with municipalities and local authorities, which clear the rubble and pave the way for displaced residents to return from southern Gaza (at the IDF's direction, around one million people moved south,) as well as working to reopen Shifa Hospital. Hamas has thus demonstrated that it remains the effective ruler of Gaza and that the IDF has failed to achieve its war goals.

Hamas is focused on survival and trying hard to create a myth whereby it cannot be defeated, in the expectation that domestic and international pressure on Israel will force it to halt the war. IDF chief Herzi Halevy addressed this issue on January 13, saying: "The Hamas leadership is pinning its hopes on a ceasefire, and is convinced that this moment is near. The goals of the war are complex and hard to achieve and will take a long time – we said this from the first moment. To dismantle Hamas, steadfastness and patience are essential. We completed the dismantlement of Hamas' military framework in northern Gaza, and now the troops are engaged in missions to deepen and maintain these achievements in this area. There are still terrorists out there, there is still some infrastructure. We will continue to attack, to pursue, and to destroy."

At the current stage of the fighting, Israel has a number of alternative courses of action – some of which complement each other:

- a. Continuing with the ground maneuver to take control of the Rafah region and the Philadelphi corridor: this area is vital in order to prevent the smuggling of arms and ammunition into Gaza and to ensure that Hamas does not recover and rebuild its power after the war. Sealing the border between Gaza and Egypt can also be carried out by the Egyptians, but an effective mechanism, supervised by the United States, is needed to ensure successful implementation by Cairo (past experience is not encouraging).

- b. Hostage deal first: halting the fighting and freeing Palestinian terrorists from Israeli prisons in exchange for all the hostages. This means that Hamas' leaders and its units would survive and Qatar, as the broker of the deal, would ensure that Hamas remains a political and military force.
- c. Recapturing the northern Gaza Strip: preventing Hamas from returning to the area, cutting it off from the rest of Gaza as a separate region, allowing a new local leadership to emerge – a technocratic government to run the civilian affairs of northern Gaza as a district, alongside professionals who have no connection to Hamas in the local authorities – to run civilian matters, stabilize northern Gaza, and start the reconstruction process.
- d. Agreeing to the regional plan outlined by US President Joe Biden: a new regional architecture and normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia. In exchange, Israel would be asked to present a political horizon, on the road to implementation of a two-state solution and transfer of control of the Gaza Strip to the “revitalized” Palestinian Authority, assuming it meets the criteria and implements the necessary reforms. A new political horizon for the “revitalized” PA would be a platform that Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Jordan could support, and help engage them in active involvement in stabilizing and reconstructing Gaza.

At the current stage of the war, Israel needs a combination of two approaches: recapturing the northern Gaza Strip (north of the Gaza river) and deepening Israeli control there, and hermetically sealing the Philadelphi corridor, which is used for smuggling, as a practical solution to prevent Hamas and other terrorist groups from rearming. Separating northern Gaza from the rest of the Strip, continuing to erase terror infrastructure, preventing Hamas from recovering, and at the same time, encouraging the emergence of a local leadership that is not afraid of Hamas because the IDF has military control of the region, coupled with sealing off the smuggling routes, will ensure that the goals that the government of Israel set for this war will be achieved – at least in northern Gaza. These goals are destroying Hamas' military and governmental capabilities; demilitarizing Gaza; creating the conditions that will afford the IDF freedom to operate in the Strip and prevent the reemergence of Hamas; establishing a security zone along the Gaza border; creating the security conditions to allow Israelis to return to their homes in the northern western Negev.

Holding on to northern Gaza could be a bargaining chip in negotiations for the release of the hostages, and transferring it to a responsible and moderate governing body may also be seen as a measure that contributes to

implementation of President Biden's framework for the Middle East: a new regional architecture and normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

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