

# The Aims of the War in Gaza—and the Strategy for Achieving Them

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**This article proposes that the declared aims of the war in the Gaza Strip and the strategy chosen to promote them are fundamentally essential, appropriate for the situation, and achievable, even if they do not lead to a “solution” in the foreseeable future. It reviews the alternatives proposed with respect to the aims and conduct of the war and argues that they lack internal coherence and do not meet the test of reality.**

In the aftermath of October 7, a discussion began in Israel about the right goals of the war against Hamas and the most suitable strategy for achieving them—a discussion that has intensified after the start of the ongoing ground offensive in the Gaza Strip. Most military commentators have supported the aim of the war to topple Hamas, while others have criticized them as echoing the IDF’s spokesmen and expressing the public indiscriminate sentiment to strike Hamas in every possible way after the massacre.

Indeed caution, criticism, and skepticism regarding fleeting sentiments are justifiable and necessary, given the problematic record of Israel’s wars in recent decades. The experiences of the First and Second Lebanon Wars, marked initially by enthusiasm but followed by disappointment, complications, and accumulated casualties, are deeply ingrained, and rightly so, in the mind of commentators. By contrast, Israel’s Operation Defensive Shield (2002) stands out for its success in regaining control of the West Bank and completely suppressing the Second Intifada, despite initial skepticism from some military commentators. Does the current war in the Gaza Strip resemble more closely Operation Defensive Shield or to the First and Second Lebanon Wars? Neither analogy is perfect, of course. We will therefore turn to a concrete analysis of the aims of the current war, the strategy for achieving them, and the alternatives that have been suggested.

The aims of the war in Gaza as defined by the cabinet are the destruction of Hamas’s military and governing infrastructure and the release of the hostages. This article proposes that the aims relating to Hamas, as interpreted by the cabinet

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and the military, and the way that the war is being conducted, are both necessary and achievable. But there are those who have rejected this position—from various directions.

Some were skeptical of the combat capabilities of the ground forces, which did not experience combat for a decade and a half. But since the start of the ground offensive in Gaza, it has become clear—and not only to the surprise of the skeptics—that both the IDF's regular and reserve forces function at an exceptional level; the close cooperation between the ground forces, air force, fire power, and intelligence is unlikely found in any other military today. Their fighting spirit and determination are admirable, and naturally so, given the crucial nature of their mission in their eyes.

The IDF's ability to overcome Hamas's defenses within a densely built-up area, with a vast underground system, and the cost in Israeli life in such a campaign were other reasons for doubt. In practice, it has emerged that the tunnel system in Gaza is far more complex, advanced, and vast than previously estimated, and that Hamas had enormous quantities of weapons and ammunition. Nevertheless, the IDF took control of Gaza City and the northern Strip and broke Hamas's organized defenses there; and, despite the challenging conditions and the spread of public despondency over an alleged "foot dragging," the IDF is close to a similar achievement in the Khan Yunis area. All this at the cost of over 200 lives so far, a heart-breaking price, but far lower than the assessments and fears prior to the operation.

Here are some of the alternative strategies that have been suggested for conducting the operation:

Some have proposed imposing a full siege on the Gaza Strip, leading to its surrender within weeks or months, and—as has also been argued—driving the population to rise up and overthrow Hamas. Anyone who has not yet realized that the world, and the United States in particular, will not allow the "State of Gaza" to be starved to death will apparently not be persuaded by any argument. The vision of a popular uprising in Gaza against an armed, fanatical, and determined organization like Hamas that would lead to the destruction of its power is no less divorced from reality.

Skeptical about the ground operation's success, others argue that an attempt to take military control of the Gaza Strip, and particularly of the densely populated urban areas, should be avoided in favor of incursions into and within the Strip, and aerial bombing of Hamas's facilities, echoing the American proposals before

the war. Supporters of this position have claimed that the IDF has no chance of victory using the current methods of the ground operation.

Given what has become evident with respect to Hamas's deployment and capabilities, military incursions of this type would scarcely have any effect on them. Potentially, this option could lead to an endless war of attrition, with no fewer losses, eroding Israeli morale, and providing a definite moral victory for Hamas. Proponents of this position also overlook that Hamas would continue to fire rockets at Israel indefinitely.

Following the capture of Gaza City and the northern Gaza Strip, amid the criticisms of "foot dragging" in Khan Yunis, some commentators have suggested a similar strategy for the southern Strip. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of such incursions is extremely doubtful, as even the intensive activity of eight Israeli brigades, above and below ground, have made very slow progress. Incursions would fail to destroy Hamas's organized forces and the IDF would not achieve operational control of the area, which should prepare the way, as planned, for low-intensity operations. Moreover, this scenario as well does not address Hamas's expected continued rocket attacks on Israel.

Some have claimed that the IDF is already using focused incursions—largely successful—against terrorist cells in the West Bank. But this claim overlooks the significant difference that the West Bank does not have the enormous organized infrastructure of a semi-state army as Hamas in Gaza does. Only following Operation Defensive Shield and the recapture of the West Bank in 2002 by high-intensity fighting, has the IDF been engaged in low-intensity operations against terrorist cells in the West Bank, which in the Gaza Strip is referred to as Stage 3.

Other voices are calling for an immediate halt to the fighting. They can be divided into those who argue that there is no chance of further gains, or that enough has already been achieved, or even that we have already achieved great results. Generally, this position is closely linked to supporting a deal to free the hostages.

In the intense public debate surrounding the issue of the hostages, the crucial question has become obscured: What deal is actually on offer, and what are the terms that can and should be accepted? It seems there is widespread consensus within the war cabinet and among the Israeli public for a ceasefire of a limited period of time, possibly a month or two, in exchange for a hostage deal. There is still a possibility that Hamas will ultimately agree to such a deal if it is limited to the release of a few dozen of the surviving elderly people from the list of some 130 hostages. Contrary to earlier skeptical opinions, the progress of the IDF forces in Khan Yunis seems to have put Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar under pressure. But

Hamas's basic demand in return for the release of all the hostages—made clear well before it was declared publicly—is an end to the war and not a ceasefire. This includes the withdrawal of the IDF from the Gaza Strip, restoration of Hamas's control over it (including international guarantees), and a prisoner exchange on the basis of "all for all."

Some will say that there must be a middle ground between Hamas's demands and what Israel can accept. However, Hamas's main interest is to ensure its survival and continued rule, and it will not let go of its key bargaining chip. Some say that without the return of the hostages—"at any price"—no victory is possible. While this sentiment is understandable, the alternative would be a resounding national defeat. The utmost efforts must be made to rescue as many hostages as possible, and Israel should be ready to pay a heavy price for this goal; but Israel's capitulation is not an option.

We must be clear about the result of a deal "at any price." It means a complete victory for Hamas. They will have survived the IDF's offensive and will reclaim their rule over Gaza. Hamas's victory and the release of all Palestinian prisoners and detainees by Israel—including those who participated in the October 7 massacre—will reverberate throughout the Middle East. The Palestinians and the Arab public, which in any case lean toward the "axis of resistance," will all support Hamas. Israel's potential allies in the Arab Middle East will be forced to fall silent and stand back.

Beyond the great cost in human life that Israel will pay over time for such a deal, Hamas will return to rule the Gaza Strip, repairing its infrastructure of tunnels and rockets, filling its ranks with new recruits, and restoring its defensive and offensive arrays. This poses a critical question for those suggesting that it will be possible to restart the war at a later stage: Have they fully considered the human toll should the IDF attempt to reoccupy the areas it would have vacated in the Gaza Strip? With over 200 Israeli soldiers having been killed since the start of the ground offensive, there would be scant willingness to incur similar losses by repeating the exercise. Furthermore, it is highly unrealistic to assume that the international community, including the United States, would support or allow Israel to restart the war.

Worst of all, after Israel gave its best shot and failed to defeat Hamas, the organization will effectively become immune to Israeli deterrence. After the enormous damage Israel has caused in Gaza, can it still be believed that Israel can deter Hamas as was widely believed before October 7? What will stop Hamas, riding the waves of its great victory, from resuming the rocket fire against Israel

without restraint and thus serving as an example to all the militias in the region? Israel's deterrence will be shattered.

Although the limitations of the concept of deterrence are well known, in the wake of October 7, the notion that deterrence has lost its significance is a mistake in the other direction. Since 1948, deterrence has been the foundation of Israel's existence. Even if it breaks down from time to time, either partly or more broadly, deterrence has always prevented a general unending war against Israel, and it has been the main factor enabling Israel to achieve long periods of peace and growth between wars. This is the source of the deep and justified feeling in Israel that the war in Gaza is an existential one. Of course, Hamas clearly does not pose an existential threat to Israel in the same way that the armies of the Arab countries posed such a threat from 1948 to 1973; but if Israel is unable to achieve a resounding result against the weakest of its enemies, the entire axis of resistance will make the lives of Israel's citizens unbearable.

The key question is what would such a resounding result look like? What is a realistic "victory" that can be achieved against Hamas, and what is apparently not achievable? Here too, commentators have mocked the slogans of "absolute victory" and "elimination of Hamas" uttered by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for political reasons, as if these harmful slogans actually represent the aims of the fighting since they were defined by the cabinet.

Militarily, it is possible to destroy Hamas's command, military units, and infrastructure as a semi-regular military organization. That has been achieved in the northern Gaza Strip and is now happening in Khan Yunis. After their destruction in high-intensity fighting, the IDF must prevent Hamas from reviving by continuous action on the ground. As in the West Bank, this project will take years. The unimagined scale of Hamas's tunnels, as revealed, has given rise to much doubt. It has been said that there are not enough explosives in the world to destroy the entire tunnel network. But it is certainly possible to expose and destroy the important underground centers: the weapons manufacturing workshops, the arms and food stockpiles, and the command and control rooms. The communications, electricity, and ventilation systems, as well as the strategic and tactical continuity of the whole network, can be cut off at vital junctions.

What the IDF is unlikely to achieve is the elimination of Hamas as a guerrilla force. Hamas's popularity is strong, necessitating that the IDF engage in "mowing the grass" operations similar to those in the West Bank for any foreseeable future. Completely preventing the occasional firing of rockets at Israel also will be impossible, given that Hamas still has some rockets, will manufacture them in

improvised workshops, or smuggle them into the Strip. However, there is a wide difference between this and a deeply entrenched organization with tens of thousands of fighters who possess thousands to tens of thousands of rockets as well as the means to produce them.

In this context, Israel should correct its most significant (and in my assessment its only) strategic mistake after October 7: the failure to block the Philadelphi corridor—the Gaza–Egypt border, the main route for smuggling into the Gaza Strip—during the first stage of the ground operation in Gaza. It is not clear how exactly this route will be blocked and the degree to which the United States and Egypt would be involved; but contrary to the skeptics, it seems that such a move will take place.

Politically, it is possible to bring an end to Hamas’s rule in Gaza, and it is critical to attack and destroy, from the air and on the ground, any location where Hamas’s military or “civilian” presence reveals itself. However, preventing Hamas, as a popular guerrilla organization with a strong hold, from vetoing any other entity that seeks to take control of Gaza will be almost certainly impossible. This is obvious to both the Palestinian Authority and to any other Arab body that has been mentioned as a possible solution for controlling the Strip.

Indeed, it is hard to believe in the prospects of any of the political solutions proposed for the day after the war, whether involving local entities, the Palestinian Authority, moderate Arab countries, or other international bodies. None of them are willing or able to be the real master that would replace Hamas. No international forces of any kind, even if fulfilling a role in Gaza, will fight Hamas. On the contrary, the presence of such forces, whether Egyptian or Saudi, not to mention western forces, will make any Israeli military action in the Gaza Strip more difficult or even impossible. For this reason, at least, it is possible that an “upgraded Palestinian leadership” or “a government of experts”—dubious names covering a multitude of well-known drawbacks—are still the preferred remedy, allowing Israel to take action wherever Hamas raises its head, as is the case today in the West Bank. Currently it is impossible to predict the extent of the chaos that will prevail or what kind of government will emerge after the war. The skeptics may once again raise questions about the purpose of it all. The answer is that this is Gaza, the lowest point in the Middle East, a Middle East in which, lest it be forgotten, all the options are difficult and bad, and there are no “solutions.” There are only bad options and options that are much worse.

Notwithstanding the lively discourse on the subject, it is hard to see a “political solution” for the Gaza problem. For the foreseeable future it remains insoluble, as

it has been since Moshe Dayan's famous eulogy in 1956 over the grave of the young man, Roi Rotberg, who was killed near the Gaza border; since the unrestrained campaign against the terrorists carried out by General Ariel Sharon at the head of the Southern Command in 1970; followed by his unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 when he served as prime minister; and since the visions of Gaza as Singapore and the helpless wishes of Yitzhak Rabin that Gaza would sink into the sea. We should not deceive ourselves on this matter. We must live with this Gaza as best we can.

Finally, some commentators entirely reject the need for war or its continuation. They believe it is simply possible to make peace. They suggest, for example, that Israel should accept the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 whereby the Arab world would recognize Israel and make peace with it in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from all the territories and an "agreed and just solution" to the problem of the refugees from 1948, based on the UN General Assembly's Resolution 194. Apparently, these commentators (if they do not forget to mention the refugee clause altogether) see no importance in the fact that by accepting the initiative, Israel would be recognizing the General Assembly's Resolution 194, which is not legally binding, thus making it a binding part of international law, which Israel has always refrained from doing. After all, the commentators will claim, the Arab initiative proposed an "agreed upon" solution based on Resolution 194, something that one might say resembles an "agreed upon solution" to the question of control of Judea and Samaria, according to the platform of extreme right-wing leader and cabinet minister Bezalel Smotrich.

It is apparently clear to these commentators that the Palestinian demands for "an agreed and just solution" to the refugee problem would be reasonable and would not include large scale realization of the "right of return" as stated in Resolution 194: "The refugees who wish to return to their homes and live in peace with their neighbors will be permitted to do so at the earliest possible time in practical terms." But to what extent have the Palestinians ever shown a willingness to accept such an accommodation and waive the "right of return," the very core of the Palestinian national ethos—1948 and not 1967 and an independent state? This question never is raised, nor is the failure of Oslo (because of Rabin's murder of course, and not because of Yasser Arafat and everything that the Palestinian national movement represents), nor are developments in the Middle East since 2002: the Arab Spring, murderous civil wars all over the Arab Middle East, and the rise of Iran and its proxies. It is not by chance that Saudi Arabia itself—whose original initiative, unlike the Arab Peace Initiative it was forced to accept, did not include Israel's acceptance of Resolution 194—is now promoting much more

moderate proposals on the Palestinian question as a condition for normalization between Israel and countries in the moderate Arab camp.

Note that even if the chances of a comprehensive peace agreement with the Palestinians seem slight at the moment, there may be a chance for more partial agreements with them. However, it must be understood that if Hamas emerges victorious from this war and sweeps up the Arab and Palestinian public with a great wave of enthusiasm, any remaining legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority will completely collapse; even if the Palestinian Authority survives, it will be unable to accept any compromise as the Palestinian public would interpret it as surrendering to Israel.

And a final clarification: war is, of course, the realm of uncertainty. There is no way of ensuring that Israel will be able to achieve the goals it has set for itself with its chosen strategy. Numerous expected and unexpected developments could sabotage success. This article does not pretend to state with any certainty that these goals will be achieved, and to what extent. It is only claimed here that the goals are fundamentally essential, appropriate for the situation, and achievable, even if they fail to lead to a “solution” in the foreseeable future. It is also argued here that the alternative aims and strategies that have been proposed lack internal coherence and do not pass the test of reality.

A half joking but fairly certain rule is that whatever governments do does not succeed. That is probably even more so in the case of Gaza, in a Middle East region, which is among the most problematic in the world. But this does not mean that the suggestions of the critics have more validity. Israel, so we must assume and hope, will survive any alternative, however bad, and even if it would pay a high or even very high price for them.