

The Long-Awaited Victory Over Hamas Was Not Achieved—What Now?

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Israel did not achieve its primary war objectives against Hamas—namely, the complete dismantling of its military and governmental capabilities. Despite suffering significant losses that outweigh its achievements, Hamas has managed to survive. Therefore, at this stage, Israel should focus on two key efforts: finalizing the framework for the return of the hostages—an imperative rooted in Jewish tradition and its moral significance in Israeli society; and leveraging the notion of expelling Gaza’s residents, as proposed by US President Donald Trump, to encourage the involvement of Arab states in stabilizing and reconstructing the Gaza Strip while ensuring that Hamas does not regain control.

The “IDF Strategy” defines victory as “achieving the war objectives set by the political leadership and the ability to impose Israel’s conditions for a ceasefire and post-war security-political arrangements on the enemy.” Israel has not achieved these objectives in the war in Gaza. Indeed, some hostages have been freed; over 17,000 terrorists—about half of Hamas’s armed forces—have been killed; the organization’s military and civilian leadership has been dismantled; most of its military structures have been destroyed; and much of Gaza has been completely devastated. However, Israel has not met the war objectives set by the political echelon: It did not fully destroy Hamas’s military and governmental capabilities, and the release of the hostages until now has been only partial. The current framework for the release of the hostages does not reflect Israel imposing its terms for a ceasefire but rather a compromise dictated by Hamas’s demands, as the organization seeks to ensure its survival at any cost. The goal of eliminating Hamas’s control over Gaza and removing its threat to Israel remains far from being realized under the current conditions.

For Hamas, too, the scale of its losses has far exceeded its gains:

A. Hamas murdered and massacred 1,163 Jews in a single day, wounded thousands, captured and destroyed Jewish settlements for several hours, and kidnapped 251 civilians and soldiers. It is now using these hostages as leverage to pressure Israel into releasing hundreds of terrorists with blood on their hands. Despite IDF achievements, Hamas continues to smuggle weapons, as all the mechanisms to prevent its resurgence were eroded even before their establishment. It repurposes remnants of IDF bombs for explosive devices and is gradually rebuilding its military ranks by recruiting young people. About half of its underground infrastructure remains intact. Hamas also exploits incoming humanitarian aid, seizing supplies and charging significant fees to distribute them—funds that it uses to restore its power. Since the ceasefire, Hamas has reactivated local municipal authorities, redeployed its operatives throughout Gaza, reinstated its civilian police, and resumed its internal security operations,

including shootings on the streets, intimidation tactics, and interrogations of opponents and collaborators with Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

B. Yet, Hamas has suffered a massive military setback. It failed to ignite a regional war against Israel and instead triggered developments that weakened the Iranian–Shiite axis. It did not succeed in reclaiming even an inch of Israeli territory. In addition, its leadership has been eliminated. Its weapon production infrastructure has been crushed. Official reports claim over 46,000 casualties, including approximately 17,000 militants. Eighty percent of Gaza is destroyed and uninhabitable, and its dire living conditions are expected to persist for years. As long as Hamas remains in control, Gaza’s reconstruction is unlikely, and in any case, it will take many years.

At the same time, Hamas’s propaganda is at its peak. Its key messages emphasize that jihad has proven effective, that it has humiliated Israel and inflicted its worst military failure since the country was established, and that it still maintains military and administrative control over Gaza. Hamas, for now, has thwarted the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia; trades hostages for the mass release of prisoners and terrorists, and has forced Israel to sign a deal with it, which the Palestinian Authority and Fatah have failed to achieve. During Hamas’s hostage transfer ceremony in Deir al-Balah, Hamas prominently displayed the slogan “We are the day after,” reinforcing its message that its rule remains in effect and will continue.

While the framework for releasing the hostages in exchange for a ceasefire and the release of Palestinian prisoners and terrorists aligns with Israel’s principles of not abandoning citizens and soldiers, upholding mutual responsibility, and fulfilling the mitzvah of prisoner redemption, it also carries significant risks: (1) it is a clear admission that Israel has not achieved total victory; (2) it provides a battered Hamas with the essential lifeline to maintain its rule and rebuild; (3) it results in the release of over a thousand terrorists, many of whom are likely to return to terrorism and kill Israelis; and (4) it allows Hamas to retain several hostages as leverage for its continued survival.

Nevertheless, at this point, Israel has no viable alternative but to continue implementing the framework—either by expanding the first phase or progressing to the second phase, which Hamas will insist on as it involves ending the war and ensuring its survival.

President Trump’s proposal to resettle Gaza’s residents elsewhere has reshaped the discourse and could influence the terms for ending the war—the continued implementation of the outline for the release of the hostages in exchange for a ceasefire or reoccupation of the Gaza Strip by Israel to create the conditions for Trump’s initiative. For Palestinians, the idea of expulsion evokes the memory of the Nakba in 1948 and the Naksa in 1967, triggering widespread shock and fear of abandonment while legitimizing mass transfer. At the same time, given the severe concerns of Egypt, Jordan, and other Arab states about a large-scale influx of Gazans into their territories, an unprecedented opportunity has emerged to urge them to take action actively and effectively in stabilizing and reconstructing Gaza—on the condition that Hamas no longer governs the Strip, as an alternative plan to that of President Trump.

Against this backdrop, Israel must establish clear positions regarding progress to the second phase of the framework for releasing the hostages and link it to the war's end-state (known as the "day after")—a definition it has so far avoided. Israel must present the following essential conditions:

- **Reconstruction in Exchange for Demilitarization**—Israel must not allow Gaza's reconstruction as long as Hamas remains in control and retains its military wing. The formula should be reconstruction in exchange for demilitarization, with Israel maintaining both the overriding security responsibility and the right to enforce demilitarization through military action.
- **Establishing an Alternative Government in Gaza**—Egypt, with Arab assistance, is working to form a technocratic administration (a civil committee) in Gaza composed of local residents without Hamas members. Israel must insist that this administration govern Gaza civilly, distribute humanitarian aid, manage local municipal authorities, and, with Arab support, establish a police force to maintain public order. The alternative of the Palestinian Authority returning to control Gaza should only be considered if it implements necessary reforms and proves its effectiveness, in line with President Abbas's vision of "one authority, one law, one weapon."
- **International Guarantees**—A Hamas-free technocratic administration must hold a monopoly on power, be supervised by an international committee, and receive necessary external aid. At the same time, the international community must acknowledge Israel's right to prevent Hamas's resurgence, enforce demilitarization, and neutralize threats. There is growing recognition, both internationally and among moderate Arab states, that Israel is the only force capable and willing to prevent Hamas's return through military means. Therefore, Israel's military freedom of action must formally receive international recognition.
- **Reforming the Education System**—A new education system must be created in Gaza to replace UNRWA's. Europe, which has funded Palestinian education for years, could play a central role in its development, alongside the UAE, which has successful experience in education for de-radicalization.
- **Border Monitoring**—Effective and advanced security mechanisms must be put in place along the Philadelphi Corridor and at the Rafah crossing to prevent weapons smuggling while preserving Israel's right to intercept arms smuggling.
- **Security Perimeter**—A buffer zone between Gaza and Israel should be maintained to enhance security and provide a greater sense of safety for residents of Israel's western Negev.
- **Resumption of Military Action**—If, after the hostages are returned, Hamas remains in power and rebuilds its military strength, Israel must resume military operations against Hamas through targeted strikes and deep incursions into Gaza.

Conclusion

Israel must make a decision that links progress in the framework of the hostage release to shaping the final outcome in Gaza—eliminating Hamas’s rule and establishing a technocratic administration supported by an inter-Arab force. To achieve this, Israel must leverage President Trump’s declaration, which served as a “wake-up call” for Arab states—particularly Egypt and Jordan—due to their concerns over the potential large-scale migration of Palestinians from Gaza into their territories and its impact on their internal stability. This shift in regional dynamics has led these countries to begin consolidating a unified Arab stance on Gaza’s future, as demonstrated in a meeting of representatives from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar in preparation for an Arab summit in Cairo at the beginning of March.

The growing engagement of the Arab states presents an opportunity for Israel to mobilize them to take decisive action—unlike in the past—to resolve the hostage crisis with Hamas, bring an end to its rule in Gaza, and establish a joint inter-Arab force to stabilize and reconstruct the Strip. Given Hamas’s expected resistance, such a force could provide the necessary pressure to facilitate its removal (the risk of Hamas attacking an inter-Arab force is low. Moreover, the organization understands that as long as it controls the Gaza Strip, no international reconstruction effort will take place) while supporting the formation of a Palestinian technocratic administration in Gaza as an alternative to the challenge posed by the potential mass migration of Gaza’s residents.

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