

Between Victory and Decisive Defeat: Evaluating Israel's Ability to Achieve Its War Objectives Against Hamas

Tamir Hayman | November 23, 2025

The concept of victory has become increasingly politicized, particularly the notion of an “absolute victory.” At the same time, the term “decisive defeat” is widely used but rarely defined with precision. This article examines the concept of victory through a professional, military-strategic lens, differentiating it from decisive defeat. The distinction is essential for understanding Israel’s achievements in the war against Hamas and for framing public expectations, especially regarding scenarios in which Hamas may continue to exist in some form. Within this context, President Trump’s September 2025 plan for ending the war and securing the return of the Israeli hostages outlines a path that, if fully implemented, could constitute a clear Israeli victory. The first part of this article clarifies the concepts of victory and decisive defeat. The second assesses the extent to which these outcomes have been achieved, with reference to President Trump’s proposed framework for the Gaza Strip.

At first glance, victory in war appears straightforward: One side accomplishes its objectives, while the other loses both the capability and the will to continue fighting. Much military history is indeed built on this simple logic. Victory ultimately rests on two questions: What have our forces achieved, and what has happened to the enemy?

Modern Definitions of Victory and Decisive Defeat

Contemporary military doctrine draws a clear distinction between the two concepts:

- Victory is the achievement of the political leadership’s war objectives, alongside the creation of a more favorable long-term security reality.
- Decisive defeat is the destruction of the enemy’s military capability—its ability *and* will to continue fighting in the current confrontation.

The political echelon sets the war’s objectives and therefore shapes the desired end state. Its authority to define purpose is the core mechanism through which it controls the military.

War Objectives as a Tool for Controlling the Military

Defining the war’s objectives enables the political leadership to shape both the scope and the intensity of the fighting. If it chooses, it may set decisive defeat as an explicit goal and the desired end state. The military participates in formulating the war’s objectives by assessing feasibility and recommending operational methods.

This dialogue must adhere to two principles:

- It must be intimate, classified, and highly confidential.
- The political echelon must not dictate the operational methods used by the military—a principle rooted in the laws governing civil-military relations.

The Difference Between Victory in Sports and Victory in War

Public expectations of victory often resemble the logic of sports: At the end of a game, the result is clear and uncontested. War, however, does not operate under fixed rules or a shared referee. As Clausewitz observed, war is “the realm of uncertainty and randomness.” Deception, misinformation, and ambiguity are inherent features, making it possible for both sides to claim victory based on their own definitions.

Decisive defeat, by contrast, is less subjective. One can objectively assess whether a side has lost its ability to continue fighting.

Stretching Tactical Concepts

Concepts of war originated at the tactical level—small, direct battles. As societies evolved and the battlefield expanded technologically and geographically, these concepts were stretched to fit operational and strategic contexts. This process diluted the original meaning of “decisive defeat.”

The stretching is even more pronounced when applied to terrorist and guerrilla organizations. While decisive defeat of such groups is possible, it is often ambiguous and complex. Since 1973, nearly all of Israel’s wars have been against such “terrorist armies,” with only two exceptions: the confrontation with Syria in 1982 and the 12-day war against Iran in 2025.

Repeatedly, the political echelon avoided setting decisive defeat as an objective. Instead, it preferred limited goals such as degrading or strengthening deterrence. This trend reflected both the military’s assessment of the high cost of decisively defeating embedded terrorist organizations and the political echelon’s reluctance to bear the cost. Over time, the concept of decisive defeat eroded.

Did Israel Win the War in Gaza?

Assuming the war has concluded, the answer depends on the extent to which Israel achieved the objectives it set at the outset:

- Toppling Hamas’s rule in the Gaza Strip and dismantling its military capabilities
- Removing all military threats from Gaza and restoring the sense of security for residents of the western Negev
- Restoring national resilience and security for Israel’s citizens

- Strengthening deterrence and preventing further escalation
- Creating conditions for the return of the hostages
- Returning evacuees from the Gaza Envelope and Northern Israel (added September 2024)

Some objectives—deterrence, sense of security, and national resilience—are not immediately measurable. Deterrence becomes visible only when it fails, and resilience is assessed over time. A sense of security is inherently subjective.

Two objectives have been clearly achieved:

- The evacuees have returned home.
- The conditions for the return of the hostages were created, although the bodies of three hostages still remain in Gaza.

The core remaining issue concerns the dismantling of Hamas’s rule and military capabilities.

The Decisive Defeat of Hamas / The Dismantling of Its Military Capabilities

According to the war’s formal objectives, decisive defeat meant dismantling Hamas’s military power and eliminating its governance. Militarily, Hamas is no longer the “terrorist army” it was before October 7, 2023. Its commanders have been killed, its battalions dismantled, and organizational structure shattered. It has no functioning headquarters, special forces, or weapons-production infrastructure, and no coherent chain of command. Its fighters operate as small, uncoordinated guerrilla cells focused primarily on survival.

Hamas now holds roughly 10% of its prewar rocket arsenal. Its estimated 17,000 fighters, mostly new and inexperienced, share approximately 10,000 rifles. The threat today differs dramatically from that of October 6. Moreover, Hamas’s condition is described as one of defeat by many Gaza residents and by prominent Palestinian opinion leaders.

However, preventing Hamas’s recovery requires sustained mechanisms. A decisive defeat, if it is to be fully realized, must include eliminating the organization’s ability to recruit, rebuild, and reenter the fighting—or offering a path such as an “armed combatant agreement” enabling operatives to disarm and exit the conflict cycle.

Eliminating Governing Capabilities

Hamas’s military defeat does not automatically translate into the end of its rule. Eliminating its governing capacity requires a competing authority capable of assuming control. Currently, Hamas still controls about half of Gaza’s territory and, due to the absence of an alternative authority, exerts influence over an even larger portion of the population. As long as Hamas retains weapons and no rival governance structure emerges, it can deter any external actor from entering Gaza or attempting to enforce disarmament.

President Trump's plan proposes a detailed alternative:

- An international governing board (the Board of Peace)
- A technocratic temporary government
- A phased return of the Palestinian Authority after comprehensive reforms (per UN Security Council Resolution 2803, passed in November 2025)
- An International Stabilization Force (ISF) including international and Palestinian security components.

Although the likelihood that it will enforce the disarmament of Hamas is low, the very fact that it would provide an alternative framework for law and order in Gaza will weaken Hamas. In practice, this governing system is designed to fulfill the war's objectives by ultimately replacing Hamas.

Conclusion

Victory requires achieving the war's objectives and improving Israel's long-term security. By many measures, Israel has in fact defeated Hamas in Gaza. However, because little time has passed, it is too early to fully assess the durability of the change. Israel's national defense posture is nonetheless significantly improved compared to the prewar period.

National defense reflects the military dimension of national security. It does not include diplomatic, economic, or societal factors. Without full implementation of the Trump Plan—particularly its second phase—Hamas will neither be fully disarmed nor replaced by a new governing authority. In such a scenario, this war objective will not be achieved.

Importantly, decisive defeat was **not** defined as an official objective. Yet Israel achieved more than was required: Hamas has been pushed back decades in military capability. Still, the organization is recovering: It controls large portions of Gaza's population, is rebuilding militarily, and is gradually restoring its command structures.

Without dismantling what remains of Hamas and preventing its renewed recruitment, Israel's achievement will be temporary, and the threat—along with future fighting—will return.