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The Future of the War on Gaza

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Strategic Studies Unit

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Introduction

On 7 October 2023, Hamas and other Palestinian Armed Groups (PAG) launched a highly coordinated attack on Israel's military and security defences on the Gaza border as well as its southern 'envelope' communities. Coined "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood", the Gaza-based groups quickly overwhelmed their Israeli targets, killing an estimated 1,200 and taking approximately 250 back to Gaza to be subsequently held as hostages.

The Israeli government led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the members of his newly formed war cabinet hit back hard. Israel's defence minister Yoav Gallant announced action not just against Hamas and the other PAG, but the entire 2.3 million Palestinian inhabitants of Gaza; "I have ordered a *complete siege* on the Gaza Strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed," he said.¹

The following day, 9 October, as he addressed Israeli troops on the border of Gaza, he declared:

I have released all restraints ... You saw what we are fighting against. We are fighting human animals. This is the ISIS of Gaza. This is what we are fighting against ... Gaza won't return to what it was before. There will be no Hamas. We will eliminate everything. If it doesn't take one day, it will take a week, it will take weeks or even months, we will reach all places.²

The Israeli bombardment that followed, starting in northern Gaza, targeting the Palestinian towns, villages and lands around Beit Lahiya and Beit Hanoun, down Salah al-Din Street, through Al Falouja to Jabalia and its massive refugee camp drove on over the successive twelve months to cover the entirety of the Gaza Strip. In terms of loss, thousands of Palestinians have been left bereaved of their children, daughters, sisters, aunts, nieces, and wives in a landscape of destruction, death, and injury.

One year on more than 42,000 Palestinians have been killed, nearly 100,000 have been severely wounded, while countless others have been disappeared by Israel's assaults; lost to the rubble. The Israeli army has wrought almost total destruction of Gaza's built environment and infrastructure including schools, universities, clinics, hospitals, water, sewage and electricity stations, play parks, libraries. According to the UN 200,000 Gazans can no longer be counted in its official population statistics.³ Indeed, as one of the world's most densely populated urban spaces Israel has systematically destroyed that space to deny Hamas and the other armed groups the advantage it enjoyed in this asymmetric conflict. Additionally, conflagration has engulfed the region.

¹ Emanuel Fabian, "Defense minister announces 'complete siege' of Gaza: No power, food or fuel," *The Times of Israel*, 9/10/2023, accessed on 29/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/ydusavbm>

² Quoted in: "Application of the Convention of the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide in the Gaza Strip," *International Court of Justice*, 26/1/2024, p. 17, accessed on 29/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mr3x4kdr>

³ "Humanitarian Situation Update #226 | Gaza Strip," *OCHA*, 4/10/2024, accessed on 29/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yrkwy5ar>

It is against this backdrop that we examine the future of the war on Gaza. Though there is a growing set of regional and global dynamics that also lead us to question the future of the wider Middle East, unfortunately that is not within the scope of this paper.

Strategic Backfoot

Al-Aqsa Flood caught Israel decidedly on a strategic backfoot. Hamas and other PAG decisively exposed a massive failure by Israel not only of its rhetoric but of its actual ability to prove invincible against a far inferior military opponent. Despite its global reputation and leadership within the military-tech and surveillance industry the events of 7 October 2023 demonstrated major security deficits that came at a huge cost for Israeli public perceptions.

On that day, in the aftermath, and in examining the initial Israeli responses to the attacks from Gaza it became obvious that a series of immense strategic errors – not only by Israel's defence, security, and intelligence community but its political leadership – had occurred and which Hamas and the other PAG divined and took advantage of.

Israel's long-standing security doctrine, assiduously crafted, professionalized and updated with 21st century Mil-Tech and force postures designed to avoid land wars in favour of aerial superiority appeared – in a matter of minutes and hours – to dissolve, leaving Israelis at their most vulnerable point in their modern-day history.

Remarkably, in the reverse of conventional intelligence approaches, Hamas and the other PAG, rather than hide their intentions and capabilities, had signalled them very clearly to Israel. Gaza-based Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar had publicly warned Israel that they were preparing for war. He'd also written to Netanyahu offering him terms for a political agreement.⁴ In widely circulated video clips on Hamas-run Telegram channels there was significant evidence of operational preparedness such as the establishment of command-and-control rooms, training, and equipment, as well as assault simulations against Israeli military border sites and adjacent communities.

Through a mix of complacency, a false sense of military and technical superiority, and a growing national disposition to simply ignore the political consequences of continuing to illegally occupy another people, Israelis were initially stunned.

Nothing to Lose

Palestinians in Gaza had endured more than fifty years of Israeli imposed occupation, refugeehood, and 17 years of a land, sea, and air blockade by Israel. In addition, Gaza had been subject to Israeli military assaults and war in 2008, 2012, 2014, 2018, 2021 and early 2023. Each time Gaza's built

⁴ Beverley Milton-Edwards & Stephen Farrell, *Hamas: The Quest for Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 2024).



environment and its critical infrastructure was degraded further. Inside Gaza rates of unemployment and dependency on humanitarian aid had soared. Palestinians had come to believe their rights were largely ignored by the international community. Gaza residents, including the armed cadres of the Hamas Izz-a-din Al Qassam Brigades, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad al-Quds Brigades and others under the Popular Resistance banner really had little left to lose. Furthermore, they were ideologically motivated to a cause for liberation.

The politics of Arab solidarity that in the past had helped Palestinians remain steadfast were being increasingly erased. In 2002 the Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia offered normalization with Israel conditional on a full withdrawal by Israel from the occupied territories and Palestinian independence.

Yet, two decades later, Israel (with US backing) managed to secure normalization agreements with some Arab states with no requirement to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine or give Palestinians their right to self-determination and an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital. No Palestinian prerequisite in return for an array of political, economic, diplomatic, intelligence, security and military relationships had been required of Israel.

Campaigns of Palestinian non-violent resistance, including the 2018 Great March of Return initiated and organized from Gaza failed to move the dial towards recognition or peace. In an opinion poll of Palestinians published in September 2023, thirty-years after the signing of the Oslo accords (and one month before the Al Aqsa Floods attack) **76% of respondents believed the prospects for the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel during the next five years ... slim or non-existent. A majority also opposed US-brokered talks for Israeli-Saudi normalization “because such normalization is not permissible before the resolution of the conflict with Israel.”**⁵

Forever War Redux Gaza

In the wake of the 7 October attacks Netanyahu’s idea of “total victory” against Gaza has been a calamity that will take decades if not generations, even at conservative estimates, to recover from. “Total victory” contrariwise is also the total embedding of the idea and acceptability by governments in significant parts of the international community of a “forever” war that will continue to be waged by Israel on Gaza and hence the Palestinian people wherever they are. For example, it draws Israeli security doctrine ever closer to a permanent Israeli presence in the West Bank, as well as accelerated Judaization of East Jerusalem.

It can be argued that scaffolding this notion of “forever war” is the now augmented pathology of dehumanization of Palestinian people in the Israeli body politic. It has been represented variously since 7 October 2023 by the political elite, including in statements made by Israeli Defence Minister Gallant,

⁵ See: “Public Opinion Poll No (89),” *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research*, 6-9/9/2023, accessed on 29/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2b54b8af>

Israeli President Isaac Herzog, and Minister Israel Katz, among others that international organizations such as the ICJ, UN, and independent human rights groups consider genocidal and brutalizing.

Within a matter of months this dynamic dehumanization has been apparent in the evolution of the Israeli strategic approach on the ground in Gaza and in framing meta-narratives of revenge centred on the Old Testament rhetoric and commandment of 'Amalek' to wipe out and destroy all opponents for attacking Jews.⁶

It has been amplified by media, including social media campaigns disseminated widely in a now globally viral environment of influence and influencing. Societal consent to this dehumanization is evident in recent polling that highlights attitudes whereby the vast majority of Israelis appear to perceive Palestinian intentions towards them as "maximalist and genocidal"⁷ (and with Palestinians similarly disposed to such dehumanising perceptions of Israelis).

Added to these perceptions are dispositions of the currently realised fears of insecurity, of displacement, and uncertainty about deterrent effects out with conventional militarised and securitised approaches by Israel when it addresses itself to its southern territories, including the Gaza-border communities and the actualisation of the 1967 green-line of the border with the Gaza Strip itself. The majority of residents living in those communities attacked on 7 October no longer want to go back. They do not feel safe and feel their government provides them with little by way of future guarantees of peace or security with their neighbours.⁸

The Future of the War on Gaza

The introduction of this paper outlined the path of war that Israel's government has now chosen in response to Palestinian proclaimed resistance to decades of illegal occupation and its associated measures. The subsequent route of war, its organizing narratives, methods, and tactics have established very powerful forms of path dependency. A year on, the future of the war on Gaza or more appositely Gaza's future after war is increasingly clear. Israel despite claiming a "military victory" against Hamas, Israel continues to devise and enact policies that draw Gaza and the surrounding region ever further from political processes that can lead to conflict resolution and peace.

There will be no jaw-jaw only forms of war, aggression, and enduring conflict. Much of this is enabled by western and other governments that cling to the ideation of Israel's right to self-defence without limits on supply of weapons, or the right legal measures that ensure justice and accountability. Such

⁶ Laurent A Lambert, "Ecocide as Genocide: A Human Security Approach to 'Utter Annihilation' in Gaza," *Strategic Paper*, no. 23, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 6/10/2024, pp. 25-28, accessed on 29/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/y4ne9rsn>

⁷ "Palestinian-Israeli Pulse: A Joint Poll," *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research*, 12/9/2024, p. 2, accessed on 29/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mrx2f63d>

⁸ Shuki Sadeh, "All but five of the Israeli communities on the Gaza border to remain empty for now," *Shomrim*, 6/6/2024, accessed on 29/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/47ab7evs>



governments have also failed to ensure firm conditionality for diplomatic engagement from the Israeli government to agree an immediate and sustainable ceasefire in Gaza (and now Lebanon), to desist from measures that are considered to constitute war crimes, genocide, and policies of apartheid, or a political path out of conflict towards resolution.

There is already substantive evidence of re-occupation of Palestinian territory and of Israeli policy blocking vital humanitarian delivery and assistance mechanisms in Gaza. According to figures from the UN and Israel, in September 2024, humanitarian aid into Gaza fell to its lowest level in seven months.⁹ The population is being starved and still Israel's government continues to now *block* UN aid from Gaza. It is already evident from UN and other data sources that there are tactics, if not policies, that will prolong the humanitarian catastrophe.

The international community, including regional states, have rallied in offers to reconstruct Gaza if war ends and there is a political roadmap with the achievement of a (viable) Palestinian state as an end goal. Netanyahu has refused all, arguing that neither Hamas nor the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank would be acceptable as governing actors in Gaza. Instead, Israeli-controlled security will remain for the foreseeable future. This is evident in the extension of their control now at every border crossing into and out of Gaza to ensure Israel's dominion.

The task of rebuilding a post-war Gaza would require a massive infusion of foreign aid, and construction material. The UN, for example, estimates that just to return Gaza's GDP to 2022 levels will take an estimated 350 years.¹⁰

Given Israel's regime of border control, its array restrictions on construction materials and equipment into Gaza in the years from 2007-2023, it would be unrealistic to expect a change post-war. Moreover, the pre-existing Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism is obviously scrapped and would thus require a new approach where Israel would only play ball if it felt that no discernible benefit to Palestinians could be accrued.

Conclusion

The lessons being learned by Israel's military, intelligence, and political establishments are tied to a conception of a military solution to their surrounding political landscape. This is clear from its regional escalation and continued policy in Gaza; the political leadership drives this home. Take Netanyahu's existentialist threat against the entire population of Lebanon, warning them to topple Hezbollah from within or face the same fate of death and *destruction* that Israel has unleashed on Gaza.

Tied to Gaza's fate is the added impetus to destroy the Iranian Axis of Resistance. Israeli tolerance of any forms of Iranian deterrence in the region is at zero. With strong western ideological support for

⁹ David Gauthier-Villars & John Davison, "Food aid to Gaza falls as Israel sets out new rule – sources," *Reuters*, 2/10/2024, accessed on 29/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/58ny27jv>

¹⁰ "Economic costs of the Israeli occupation for the Palestinian people: the economic impact of the Israeli military operation in Gaza from October 2023 to May 2024," *UNCTAD*, A/79/343, 10/9/2024, accessed on 29/10/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/54escma4>

this hawkish approach, Israel's political leadership and many in its military establishment now want to extend the war to the defeat of its Iranian enemy. This pre-emptive approach bolsters the case for quietening not just Israel's northern front but also Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and even Iran itself.

Absent the restraint of a unified international community, the Israeli war on Gaza will continue. So too the prolongation of conflict and catastrophe for millions of insecure and displaced civilians. The likelihood of no-day after, no ceasefire, no humanitarian surge, no reconstruction, no return home, no release of Israeli hostages, and no political horizon increases with every passing day.

Short-to-medium term scenarios, publicly circulated by Israel and its allies, do not bode well for the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip. The ceasefire frame and narrative has been minimized as a diplomatic tool in terms of a true halt to hostilities in return for the offer of an inclusive political dialogue on post-war reconstruction, security, and governance for the Palestinian people by the Palestinian people. Instead, ceasefire mediation and negotiations have stalled amid mutual accusations of spoiler tactics and at best offer little more than temporary initiatives to halt violence for some days at a time in return for a few hostage releases.

Israel's devastating attrition against Gaza also means that the likelihood of Palestinians being able to recover and reconstruct in ways that will rebuild society, economy, and frames of governance are severely reduced. In the past when Israel waged war on Gaza's people, it ensured that reconstruction was restricted, and it is already evident that Israel will prevent Gaza from recovering sufficiently to sustain itself and its population in the future. We also predict that the forms of governance conditionality that will be built into plans for the reconstruction of Gaza by foreign, including Arab, sponsors will hinder the wider impetus for reconstruction and offer little by way of hope for a Gaza free from Israel's iron fist.

Urgent action to reverse the status quo, to re-create and re-establish meaningful consensus for a political horizon, agreements to negotiation, dialogue, and new confidence building measures can obviously be taken. It has happened in the past between Israel and Palestinians; it has happened in other enduring wars and conflicts, but the likelihood of this happening in the foreseeable future is very low.



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