

# MES insights

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## THE WAR IN GAZA

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On 7 October 2023, the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas, in collaboration with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization and other smaller armed groups, started a war with Israel by initiating a surprise attack against Israeli towns, villages, and military installations bordering the Gaza Strip. The small number of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) units deployed along this border were spread out for several reasons: because the Israeli government prioritized the protection of settlements in the West Bank; because there was no early warning of the attack; and because the attack occurred during holiday vacations. This led to a crumbling of IDF defenses. The terrorists were successful in penetrating many Israeli civilian communities and started a campaign of murder and maiming against entire families. More than 1,400 people, mostly civilians, were killed, and more than 200 people, also mostly civilians and including women and children, were taken as hostages into Gaza.<sup>1</sup>

Following this heinous and murderous attack, Israel declared full war against Hamas. The stated goals of the war are the destruction of Hamas' military capabilities and ability to execute terrorist attacks and the removal of Hamas' control over the Gaza Strip. At this stage, the IDF is conducting massive bombing operations of military and terrorist targets and executing raids with ground forces for the purpose of collecting intelligence and preparing the battle area for the next phase of the war, which will probably be a massive ground invasion. The main operational obstacle facing the IDF, in addition to Hamas' military capabilities and the tunnel systems it has built, is the embedment of terrorist forces in the civilian population, which makes it impossible to fight in these areas without vast collateral damage. One way in which the IDF is trying to minimize civilian casualties is by making great efforts to convince the Gazan civilian population to evacuate the battle areas before they are invaded or bombed.<sup>2</sup>

It seems that the IDF is preparing a thorough and careful ground campaign and is not rushing into this stage of the war prematurely. Israel has learned the lessons of previous campaigns. The IDF will begin its ground campaign after Hamas' military and defensive capabilities have been degraded substantially by the bombing campaign. The ground campaign itself will be cautious and thorough, and it will take time because a large part of it will take place in urban areas and IDF units will need to deal with the main element of Hamas' defensive system: its tunnel systems. Israel also wishes to give time to the United States to make its preparations for possible eventualities. Finally, Israel wishes to broker a hostage deal even despite slim chances of success.

At this initial stage of the war, it is too early to make credible predictions about how it will develop, but it is possible to conduct some initial analysis of the strategic-political process that led to this heinous attack and war as well as initial partial analysis of some of the war's operational aspects.

At this point, it seems that the IDF failed to stop Hamas' attack and protect the

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Israeli civilian population along the border with Gaza for several reasons:

1. An intelligence failure on several levels. This includes the following:
  - A failure to uncover preparations for such a vast operation that spanned months, and probably years, and a failure to give a concrete warning right before the start of the attack. These failures resulted from IDF intelligence successes in the past and very high levels of confidence in the intelligence coverage of the Gaza Strip. The assumption was that such broad preparations could not take place without emitting signals that would be traced by the IDF's sensors and intelligence sources.
  - A lack of imagination by IDF intelligence producers. After 16 years of military conflict with Hamas controlling the Gaza Strip and repeated attempts by very small Hamas forces to cross the border and attack Israelis—with no large-scale attempts being made at all—it was difficult to imagine a massive attack of this kind.
  - The intimate knowledge that Hamas has acquired of the vast Israeli system of sensors and other information collection means after years of struggle with Israel. This, coupled with Hamas' ability to maintain very high discipline of the forces involved in the preparations for the attack and avoid leakage of information, led to its successful execution. Hamas' knowledge concerning Israeli sensors also proved useful to the attackers because they were able to neutralize the IDF's tactical sensors at the beginning of the attack and deny the IDF's deployed forces essential information.
2. A failure to prepare for the attack at the operational level. It is an axiom that no armed forces are immune to surprise attacks and that intelligence services can fail in providing early warning. Military forces cannot afford complacency and must prepare for worst-case scenarios. The Israeli command allowed the deployment of IDF forces bordering the Gaza Strip to be too thin and did not keep enough reaction forces on alert for such an attack. There was also too much trust placed in vulnerable tactical sensors in the preparation of the defense plans.
3. The reliance on tactical sensors also reflected a degree of blind faith in technology. The growing capabilities of different sensors and high-precision computerized

weapon systems created for Israel an illusion of invincibility and a lack of awareness of the possibility that some of these systems could be neutralized using simple methods and means, as was done by Hamas during the attack.

Israel arrived at this disastrous crisis because of the failure of its policies toward the Palestinians. When Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in 2007, two years after the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the Israeli government faced a choice between two political and military strategies. The first strategy involved adapting to a reality in which Hamas was one of two major political factions in the Palestinian territories, the other being Fatah (Palestinian National Liberation Movement). Any Israeli government that genuinely wished to end the conflict with the Palestinians would strive to include Hamas in the bilateral political process alongside its Fatah rivals. That would have required Israel to enter direct talks with Hamas while supporting reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah and taking steps to strengthen the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in Ramallah with political and economic steps. The odds of that policy succeeding would have been dependent, of course, on the willingness of Hamas to enter such a dialogue, first informally and then formally, and on an Israeli preparedness to resume negotiations with the Palestinian Authority to first ameliorate and then resolve the conflict.

The other option was to adopt a strategy of consistently weakening Hamas and strengthening the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in the hopes of first limiting Hamas' capabilities and then ultimately ending its control of Gaza. That option would have also had to include a credible political process aimed at a permanent status agreement, possibly achieved through a series of smaller agreements and unilateral steps.

There was no guarantee that either of these strategies would have completely resolved the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, but they could have stopped the consistent movement to a one-state reality in which Palestinians in the West Bank were under Israeli occupation, with no political rights and facing expanding settler land grabs. These two options also would have introduced more flexibility because Israel could move from one strategy to the other depending on the reactions and actions of the other parties.

These two strategies each had their weaknesses and potential costs, but since the end of the Israeli government led by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2009, successive administrations have chosen neither of them. Olmert had tried the "weakening Hamas" strategy for some time, but he was forced to resign before achieving any of his goals. The cur-

rent Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who has served in the role for almost the entire period since 2009, subsequently adopted a third strategy that was bound to fail.

The basic assumption of this third strategy is that Israel should not strive to achieve a permanent status agreement with the Palestinians. This is due in part to the Netanyahu-led government's interest in maintaining and expanding the Israeli settlements project in the West Bank and is also based on the notion that an independent Palestinian state would pose too much of a security threat to Israel. The underlying assumption is that the conflict with the Palestinians cannot be resolved—it can only be contained.

In 2009, Netanyahu gave a speech at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel, in which he declared his acceptance of a Palestinian state with several conditions.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, he abandoned the political process with the Palestinians, eventually making it clear that he opposed the establishment of a Palestinian state.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Netanyahu enabled a rapid expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank.<sup>5</sup> He adopted different ways to preempt any resumption of negotiations with the Palestinians that might lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

A major instrument of this third option pursued by successive Netanyahu-led governments was their strategy toward Hamas. Israeli dialogue with the Palestinians was replaced by a strategy of “divide and conquer,” which aimed at weakening the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah and strengthening Hamas' hold on power in the Gaza Strip. Netanyahu believed this to be the best way to ensure that no viable political process would be possible. He could reject any pressure from within Israel, the region, or the international community to resume negotiations with the Palestinians or take other steps to facilitate an eventual agreement by arguing that the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah and the Palestine Liberation Organization were not partners because they did not represent all the Palestinian people and, therefore, there was no sense in negotiating with them.

While there were several rounds of violent conflicts with Hamas forces in the Gaza Strip during those years, Netanyahu's objective was to build a kind of credible deterrence vis-à-vis Hamas without hurting too much its ability to rule. That

proved obviously unsuccessful on 7 October, and the basic strategy of keeping Hamas in power in Gaza while not dealing with the core of the conflict with the Palestinians subsequently collapsed.

So far, other members of the so-called “Axis of Resistance” have not fully joined in this current military conflict.<sup>6</sup> Hezbollah is initiating provocations along the Lebanon-Israel border, and the IDF is responding with limited retaliations that are proportional to these attacks. There is some information about a Houthi attempt to attack Israel with missiles that was foiled by the U.S. Navy.<sup>7</sup> The Israeli strategy is clear. The priority is the achievement of the aforementioned stated objectives of the war in Gaza. On other fronts, Israel is adopting a defensive posture coupled with limited retaliations, but escalation into a full conflict with Hezbollah and possibly Iran and its other proxies is possible. One can assume that Iran is trying to steer the conflict quite carefully in a way that will not hurt its core interests, but such a situation is prone to mistakes. The conclusion is that escalation to a multi-theater war is indeed possible. The decisive moment may come when the large-scale Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip begins and how other actors in the region and beyond decide to react to it.

## ENDNOTES

1. Cassandra Vinograd and Isabel Kershner, “Israel's Attackers Took More Than 200 Hostages. Here's What We Know About Them,” *New York Times*, 27 October 2023.
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3. Bar-Ilan University, “PM Netanyahu's 2009 Bar-Ilan Speech (Eng),” YouTube video, 28:41, 18 May 2011.
4. Jodi Rudoren, “Netanyahu Says No to Statehood for Palestinians,” *New York Times*, 16 March 2015.
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6. *Axis of Resistance* refers to an informal alliance of states and their proxies led by the Islamic Republic of Iran that includes Syria, the Houthi-led government in Yemen, Hezbollah, Hamas, and other Iran-led and organized groups made up of Afghans, Iraqi, and Pakistanis. See Fatima Al-Kassab, “What Is the ‘Axis of Resistance’ of Iran-Backed Groups in the Middle East?,” NPR, 26 October 2023.
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