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ISRAEL-HAMAS CONFLICT:



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OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS AND STRATEGY

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Israel-Hamas Conflict: Operational Considerations and Strategy

Abstract

The recent attack by Hamas demonstrates an unprecedented level of capability and sophistication from the extremist militia, coupled with a significant intelligence failure on Israel's part. The IDF's vulnerability can be attributed to an expanding threat landscape and the evolving counter-intelligence tactics used by their adversaries. The rise of Iran-backed forces in the region, along with the increasingly covert operations by Hamas and similar groups, challenges Israel's intelligence capabilities. However, the pressing question now is not about the occurrence of the attack but how Israel should respond. Potential strategies for Israel to reestablish deterrence include maintaining direct control, transferring authority to the West Bank, or adopting a collaborative International-Arab governance model. Each option carries significant strategic implications. Direct Israeli control might strain its resources and lead to further conflicts. Handing authority to the West Bank Authorities could embolden extremist factions. On the other hand, a joint governance approach could upset regional power balances. Given these complexities, Israel might consider a two-pronged strategy: retaining limited territorial control in areas of Gaza adjacent to the Israeli border, while conducting special operations throughout the rest of the Gaza Strip to neutralize and eliminate high-value enemy facilities and individuals. This approach would address immediate security concerns and provide a window to develop a sustainable strategy that considers both national and international perspectives.

Key Words

Israel, Hamas, Gaza, Middle East

About the Author

Arman Mahmoudian is a Ph.D. candidate in Politics and International Affairs at the University of South Florida (USF). He also serves as an adjunct faculty member at the USF Judy Genshaft Honors College, where he offers courses on Russia, the Middle East, and International Security. Additionally, Arman works as a research assistant at the USF Global and National Security Institute with a focus on Russia and the Middle East. Outside of academia, he frequently provides expert analysis in the media, having appeared on notable networks such as Al-Jazeera and the BBC. He has also contributed articles to leading publications including The Atlantic Council, The National Interest, and The Stimson Center, among others.

The October 7th Hamas attack on Israel forced the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to respond and take reactionary military measures, which include invading the Gaza Strip to restore order and deterrence. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has declared in response to the attacks that Israel, [“is at war.”](#) He later stated about the initial retaliatory airstrikes in Gaza, [“...this is only the beginning”](#) and [“That means that this is a long war...”](#) With the IDF surrounding the Gaza Strip and senior Israeli officials calling for an invasion what options does Israel have? As the world waits for Israel’s next move, only a few ways ahead exist and all of them have dramatic implications for the region. This article will explore four potential options for the IDF, then review the strategic implications of the situation, before examining the challenges of the post-war period.

Operational Options

As the IDF initiates a full-scale ground offensive into Gaza, four primary operations are on the table: operational patience, military occupation, invasion to establish a demilitarized zone (DMZ) then withdrawal, and surgical operations followed by establishing a DMZ. Each of these options seems feasible as Israel musters over [350,000 reserve troops](#) to complement the roughly 170,000 active forces already deployed around the country.

Operational Patience: This would entail the sustained bombardment of Hamas’s strongholds while buying time for several factors to fall into place. This option will prevent Hamas militia reinforcements from reorganizing and cripple any forthcoming attempts to assault Israel. It also buys time for the IDF to plan and train for an invasion, and for the US to posture Naval forces in the region. Additional time also enables freeing hostages through negotiations and allows people to evacuate from [North Gaza in accordance with Israeli directions](#). The IDF employed this option in the first few weeks following the attacks, but larger ground incursions into Gaza have now taken place. The IDF is likely preparing for one of the other three operations detailed in this section.

Military Occupation: This involves a comprehensive invasion of the Gaza Strip with the aim of establishing enduring military control. The urban fighting entailed in this situation would have massive civilian casualties and destroy most of the remaining infrastructure in Gaza. This would worsen the already dire humanitarian crisis in Gaza for a post-war occupation force to handle.

A New DMZ - Temporary Military Occupation with Permanent “No Man’s Land”: This strategy involves a brief but full invasion of the Gaza Strip to pacify the region. Afterwards, control could be transitioned to West Bank or other authorities. Concurrently, a permanent buffer between the Gaza Strip and Israel could be created as a “No Man’s Land” to preemptively counter any similar future aggressions. This option would create a DMZ and would freeze the conflict without a formal solution in the same vein of the Korean Peninsula or Russia’s frozen conflicts in Georgia or Moldova.

Localized Invasion with Special Operations within the Gaza Strip: Concurrent with the targeted bombardment of Hamas positions in Gaza to destroy and neutralize them, the IDF could initiate a localized invasion of areas of Gaza adjacent to the Israeli border. Under this strategy, Israel would make a limited advance into Gazan territory, thereby occupying areas close to its own borders to create a security buffer. In tandem, special operation forces could execute missions to neutralize high-value

targets and rescue hostages. This effort would encompass the targeting of strategic points such as tunnel systems, key leadership, and arms manufacturing/cache sites.

Operational Considerations

Israel possesses the requisite firepower and resources to execute any of these operations, although several factors could potentially influence their long-term viability of these options. Restoring and maintaining deterrence is a key objective for Israel. An inadequate response to this attack may embolden adversaries to launch more attacks. Limited damage to Hamas's military capability might not be sufficient to reestablish deterrence. Past events, such as the Hamas-Israel conflict of 2021 and the Israel-Hezbollah War of 2006, have demonstrated that militant groups, with support from their backers like Iran, can quickly recover from damages and resume their activities. Israel has a tightrope to walk between a proportionate response limiting international scrutiny with limited deterrence, and a more hard-hitting approach that sends a strong deterrence message, but engenders outcries of unwarranted violence.

International Sympathy: The international community agrees in condemning the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel, and for Israel to conduct an appropriate and measured response to deterring future attacks. However, current bombing operations has resulted in over [8,000 Palestinian deaths](#) and has started to erode international backing. Additionally, a prolonged strategic paralysis or extended military occupation risks even more civilian casualties, which may further limit international support. Additionally, as the humanitarian crisis in Gaza gets worst by the day, public opinion will inevitably turn against Israel. There have already been large [pro-Palestine protests around the world calling for a cease fire](#). As this situation worsens, it may make support from the United States to Israel less tenable. President Biden has already called for [14.3 billion in defense aid](#) to Israel on top of another [61.4 billion for Ukraine](#). Its unclear how long the U.S. public and lawmakers will continue to support such high amounts of aid sent abroad. Without support from the West, Israel could face financial troubles if it opts for a long-term occupation.



Fiscal Implications: Israel, while militarily robust, must be judicious in its approach. Prolonged conflict, especially when relying on reserve troops, is financially burdensome. Furthermore, in the event of a complete Gaza occupation, significant financial commitment would be required to support its two million inhabitants and the reconstruction of the destroyed infrastructure. Failing to address this could exacerbate poverty, intensifying long-term issues such as further radicalization of groups in the region and turning world opinion against Israel.

Potential Rise in Extremism: History indicates that aggressive suppression of anti-Israeli factions often results in the emergence of even more radicalized groups. For example, the decline of the Amal Movement in Lebanon led to the rise of Hezbollah, and the weakening of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) established the groundwork for creation of Hamas in Gaza. Additionally, the

explosion at the al-Ahli hospital in Gaza spurred global reactions such as the [terrorist attack](#) in Brussels, Belgium, resulting in the deaths of two Swedish nationals, widespread riots directed at U.S. embassies in [Lebanon](#), as well as the U.S. military base in [Turkey](#), and [drone attacks](#) against the U.S. troops in Iraq. Clearly, there is strong potential for the current conflict to incite extremism and inspire further terrorist attacks in the West.

Diversion of Attention from Other Threats: While countering Hamas’s provocations is paramount for restoring deterrence, Israel also faces threats from multiple other fronts: Hezbollah in Lebanon, escalating tensions in the West Bank, and an increasing Shia militia presence in Syria, including factions like the Syrian al-Hussien brigade and the Iraqi PMF, which operate in proximity to Iranian IRGC Quds forces. A disproportionate focus on Gaza could inadvertently open avenues for surprise assaults from these fronts. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has spoken about these potential threats, particularly the one posed by Hezbollah. [He recently stated](#), “If Hezbollah decides to enter the war... It will be making the mistake of its life. We will strike it with strength that it cannot even imagine and the significance to it and to the country of Lebanon will be devastating.”

Furthermore, beyond the diversion of attention from local threats, there’s potential for distraction on



the global stage. A region-wide conflict would necessitate significant resources and mobilization from Western powers, potentially diverting attention from issues like Iran’s nuclear program, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and China’s aggressive posture toward Taiwan. Russia’s recent [offensive maneuvers](#), following months of a more defensive stance, coupled with the Chinese Air Force’s continuous [provocations](#)

in Taiwan’s airspace, serve as evidence that U.S. adversaries are willing to seize the opportunity presented by the West’s heightened focus on the Middle East. With the myriad of threats facing Israel, it must address several strategic challenges in the near future.

Strategic Challenges

Despite the military methods Israel chooses to employ against Hamas militias, there are several long-term issues that Israel and its allies must prepare to address.

Rapid-Response Capabilities: Setting aside the reevaluation of intelligence measures, there are other military challenges that Israel should be mindful of, particularly concerning mobility and aerial defense. In the days leading up to the October 7th attack, the IDF deployed a significant portion of its troops into areas adjacent to the West Bank, especially Eastern Jerusalem, due to concerns over potential protests marking the anniversary of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Consequently, when the unexpected Hamas assault was launched, IDF troops had to be quickly [remobilized](#) from the West Bank and deployed to Gaza, compromising Israel’s rapid-response capability. This facilitated the escalation of Hamas militants’ initial advances. In this context, it is crucial to give special attention to Israel’s rapid-response

capabilities, especially since current events suggest an increasing likelihood of multi-front engagements for Israel.

The Adversaries' Application of the Concentration of Force: Concentration of Force is a fundamental military principle that emphasizes massing forces at a decisive place and time to achieve a specific objective. Recent shifts in warfare tactics, like Russia's deployment of numerous Kamikaze Drones in Ukraine and Hamas's use of "Rocket Artillery Barrage" tactics, suggest that groups confronting opponents with advanced and ample aerial defenses are increasingly resorting to rocket and drone barrages. These barrages aim to suppress and neutralize enemy air defenses, enforce area denial, impede the opponent's movements in targeted zones, and induce psychological effects, causing disorder behind enemy lines. Considering the likelihood of the U.S.'s potential adversaries and its allies embracing vast and intensive aerial offense strategies, it's crucial to enhance aerial defense capabilities. The focus should be on loading capacity and cost-effectiveness, gearing up for prolonged confrontations. Such prolonged confrontations could jeopardize efforts to maintain diplomatic stability in the region.

Arab-Israeli Normalization: The Arab World's response to Hamas's actions against Israel suggests that the path toward full normalization of Arab-Israeli relations remains lengthy. Moreover, the stability of existing normalized relations, such as between Israel and Jordan, is becoming increasingly uncertain. The reluctance of the Arab States of the Persian Gulf to condemn Hamas's actions and their urging Israel to refrain from escalating the situation highlights the deep rift between the Arab World and Israel. Additionally, Saudi Arabia's choice to [halt](#) further discussions with Israel about normalizing relations underscores the significant anti-Israeli sentiment prevalent among the public, which influences other Arab nations' policies towards Israel. The decisions by Jordan, a country that has established "normalized" relations with Israel and receive substantial financial support from the US, to [decline](#) discussions with U.S. President Biden about Israel's actions in Gaza emphasize that when faced with choosing between public sentiment and international obligations, these nations tend to prioritize domestic pressures.

Learning from the Intelligence Failure

Hamas's unexpected assault on October 7th exposed a significant intelligence vulnerability within Israel. The fact that Hamas mobilized [2,500 militants](#) to breach the Gaza-Israel barrier, staged over [3,000 rockets](#) for launch against Israel, and caught Israeli military and intelligence units off guard indicates an unprecedented intelligence failure on Israel's part. However, this failure could be attributed to two major factors: the expansion of the threat horizon and changes in the enemy's counter-intelligence dynamics.

The Expansion of the Threat Horizon: Tensions continue to escalate in the West Bank, fueled by Iran's attempts to arm the region and the expansion of Iran's military presence in Syria. This includes setting up [13 military bases](#) across Syria and the establishment of its Syrian proxy militia, [al-Hussien Brigade](#), along with active Iraqi Shia militias in Syria. In addition, recently Israel's Defense Minister, Yoav Gallant, [disclosed](#) that Iran and Hezbollah are collaboratively constructing an airport in southern Lebanon, situated merely 12 miles from Israel's border. This infrastructure is reportedly [tailored](#) to host mid-sized aircraft, large drones, helicopters, and other UAVs. Such a development would mark Hezbollah as the first Shia militia with its own dedicated airfield. These developments indicate an

expanding threat spectrum for Israel. The resultant challenges could stretch the Israeli intelligence community's resources and focus across multiple threats, increasing the risk of potential intelligence oversights similar to past instances.

Enemy's Counter-Intelligence Dynamics: In addition to the expanding threat horizon, militias are rapidly adapting their counter-intelligence and covert strategies. They are now avoiding the use of modern telecommunications methods, relying more on camouflage and covert facilities, and tightening the classification and distribution of sensitive information. In the case of Hamas's actions on October 7th, sources [suggest](#) that militants communicate through means such as exchanging notes, face-to-face meetings, or trusted third-party messengers, reducing the effectiveness of Israel's digital surveillance capabilities. Furthermore, Iran-backed militants like Hezbollah and Hamas have constructed extensive networks of [tunnels](#) for transportation, weapon storage, and concealment, making tracking them more complex and increasing their covert activities.

A recent report also [suggests](#) that aside from the immediate commanders and operators of the recent Hamas assault, the broader Hamas leadership was not aware of the specific details regarding the operation. They only provided political approval for the attack. This indicates that militias are attempting to reduce intelligence exposure by limiting access to sensitive information within their inner circles. There may be a need to reevaluate the role of human intelligence assets in the Gaza Strip. Reassessing the network of informants and assets may be necessary, as their apparent ineffectiveness in alerting Israel suggests that they might either no longer be capable of carrying out their missions or have been compromised by Hamas, possibly functioning as double-agents, and providing false information to Israeli authorities.

The Post-War Gaza Dilemma

A central issue remains the sovereignty of the Gaza Strip. If Hamas were removed from the Gaza Strip, a complex question would arise for Israel and the international community: Who governs? Israel has three immediate options for post-war administration of the strip: Israeli control, transferring control, or joint control.



Israeli Control: In this scenario, upon successfully gaining control over the Gaza Strip, Israel would establish a military administration and retain dominance over the area. This strategy was previously employed after the Six-Day War in 1967, lasting until Israel's [disengagement](#) from Gaza in 2005. However, it proved unfeasible. Administering an area as dense as Gaza, with a population surpassing two million, demands significant resources and support. Under such circumstances, if Israel cannot provide the essentials for Gazans, the IDF would face challenges from a population grappling with postwar destruction of infrastructure and housing, a military occupation, and extreme economic difficulties. This situation would necessitate substantial military resources and divert Israel's focus from

other regions, such as Lebanon, the West Bank, and Syria, potentially making way for unforeseen challenges. Furthermore, an occupation of Gaza could spark large-scale protests within the Strip, which could potentially extend to the West Bank and Arab-Israeli communities with a population exceeding [two million](#) people, possibly igniting another “intifada.”

Moreover, if Israel assumes control of Gaza, they might eventually need to claim ownership of the Strip, granting Gazan residents Israeli citizenship. This scenario could lead to significant demographic and societal shifts that Israel might not be prepared to handle. Presently, Arab-Israelis make up [about a quarter](#) of Israel’s population. Including Gazans would push this number past five million, representing over a third of Israel’s inhabitants. Given Israel’s democratic principles, this could lead to profound political transformations that might challenge the fundamental Jewish character of the nation.

Transfer to the West Bank Authorities: Another option would be transferring governance of the Gaza Strip to the West Bank Authorities, who are generally perceived as less radical than Hamas and more open to a long-term coexistence with Israel. This strategy, however, has been previously explored. Following Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, the West Bank authorities, primarily represented by the Fatah Party, were expected to assume control of Gaza. This was especially anticipated since their favored candidate, Mahmoud Abbas, had won the 2005 Palestinian Presidential Election just a few months before Israel’s unilateral disengagement.

Nevertheless, due to the territorial separation between the West Bank and Gaza, [coupled](#) with accusations of corruption against the Fatah Party and its perceived closeness with Israel, the Hamas-backed “Change and Reform List” secured a victory in the parliamentary elections. This result bifurcated the Palestinian political landscape, with Fatah maintaining control over the presidential office and Hamas gaining dominance over the parliament. This political schism culminated in an armed conflict between the two factions in 2006, eventually leading to Hamas’s control of Gaza following the Battle of Gaza in 2007. Given this history, if Israel were to transfer Gaza to the West Bank’s authority’s post-occupation, it might further weaken the West Bank’s standing among Palestinians and potentially pave the way for another extremist group to emerge.

Joint International-Arab Governance: Another potential solution could be the formation of a joint International-Arab governance over Gaza. This could be endorsed by the United Nations, predominantly enforced by Egypt and Jordan, and primarily funded by the Arab States of the Persian Gulf. A significant obstacle would be potential objections from Palestinians, both within the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Such objections might escalate into widespread unrest across Palestinian territories, resulting in confrontations between the International Governance of Gaza and protesters and leading to potential casualties. In such a scenario, citizens of third-party countries involved, especially Egypt and Jordan, may empathize with the protesters and develop adversarial sentiments towards their own governments. A historical precedent for such a reaction can be found in Egypt following the Camp David Accords. The accord [ignited](#) Islamist activism, culminating in the assassination of President Sadat by members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad in 1981.

Conclusion

Given the complexities discussed, a measured response to Hamas's actions is crucial due to its potential strategic implications both regionally and internationally. Failing to respond adequately could jeopardize Israel's deterrence capabilities, potentially emboldening Hamas, and similar actors to mount further attacks. Conversely, a full-fledged occupation of Gaza without a well-thought-out post-occupation strategy might fuel extremism across the region and even spark broader conflicts. Such an escalation would divert Western resources and focus from other pressing global issues, such as those in Ukraine and Taiwan. One potential approach to consider is a localized invasion of Gaza. This would allow Israel to control areas of Gaza adjacent to its borders and establish a buffer zone to enhance security. Simultaneously, targeted special operations within Gaza to neutralize high-value threats could offer a pragmatic short-term solution. This strategy would afford Israel both the time and the security to devise a more comprehensive long-term plan.



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