

International Press



Hamas Is Winning

Why Israel's Failing Strategy Makes Its Enemy Stronger

Nine months of Israeli air and ground combat operations in Gaza have not defeated Hamas, nor is Israel close to vanquishing the terrorist group. To the contrary, according to the measures that matter, Hamas is stronger today than it was on October 7.

Since Hamas's horrific attack last October, Israel has invaded northern and southern Gaza with approximately 40,000 combat troops, forcibly displaced 80 percent of the population, killed over 37,000 people, dropped at least 70,000 tons of bombs on the territory (surpassing the combined weight of bombs dropped on London, Dresden, and Hamburg in all of World War II), destroyed or damaged over half of all buildings in Gaza, and limited the territory's access to water, food, and electricity, leaving the entire population on the brink of famine.

Although many observers have highlighted the immorality of Israel's conduct, Israeli leaders have consistently claimed that the goal of defeating Hamas and weakening its ability to launch new attacks against Israeli civilians must take precedence over any concerns about Palestinian lives. The punishment of the population of Gaza must be accepted as necessary to destroy the power of Hamas.

But thanks to Israel's assault, Hamas's power is actually growing. Just as the Viet Cong grew stronger during the massive "search and destroy" operations that ravaged much of South Vietnam in 1966 and 1967 when the United States poured troops into the country in an ultimately futile bid to turn the war in its favor, Hamas remains intractable and has evolved into a tenacious and deadly guerrilla force in Gaza—with lethal operations restarting in the northern regions that were supposedly cleared by Israel only a few months ago.

The central flaw in Israel's strategy is not a failure of tactics or the imposition of constraints on military force—just as the failure of the United States' military strategy in Vietnam had little to do with the technical proficiency of its troops or political and moral limits on the uses of military power. Rather, the overarching failure has been a gross misunderstanding of the sources of Hamas's power. To its great detriment, Israel has failed to realize that the carnage and devastation it has unleashed in Gaza has only made its enemy stronger.

THE BODY COUNT FALLACY

For months, governments and analysts have fixated on the number of Hamas fighters killed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as if this statistic were the most important measure of the success of Israel's campaign against the group. To be sure, many Hamas fighters have been killed. Israel says 14,000 of the estimated 30,000 to 40,000 fighters Hamas had before the war are now dead, while Hamas insists it has lost only 6,000 to 8,000 fighters. U.S. intelligence sources indicate the real number of Hamas dead is around 10,000.

A focus on these numbers, however, makes it hard to truly assess Hamas's power. Despite its losses, Hamas remains in de facto control of large swaths of Gaza, including those areas where the territory's civilians are now concentrated. The group still enjoys tremendous support from Gazans, allowing militants to seize humanitarian supplies almost at will and easily return to areas previously "cleared" by Israeli forces. According to a recent Israeli assessment, Hamas now has more fighters in the northern areas of Gaza, which the IDF seized in the fall at the cost of hundreds of soldiers, than it does in Rafah in the south.

Hamas is now waging a guerrilla war, involving ambushes and improvised bombs (often made from unexploded ordnance or captured IDF weapons), protracted operations that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's national security adviser recently said could last through the end of 2024 at least. It could still strike in Israel; Hamas likely has some 15,000 mobilized fighters—roughly ten times the number of fighters who carried out the October 7 attacks. Further, more than 80 percent of the group's underground tunnel network remains usable for planning, storing weapons, and evading Israeli surveillance, capture, and attacks. Most of Hamas's top leadership in Gaza remains intact. In sum, Israel's fast-moving offensive in the fall has given way to a grinding war of attrition that would leave Hamas with the ability to attack Israeli civilians even if the IDF presses ahead with its campaign in southern Gaza.

Failed counterinsurgencies in the past often fixated on enemy body counts. The IDF is now engaged in the familiar game of whack-a-mole that bogged down U.S. troops in Afghanistan for years. Slavish attention to body counts tends to confuse tactical and strategic success and ignore the key measures that would show whether the strategic power of the opponent is growing even as the group's immediate losses mount. For a terrorist or insurgent group, the key source of power is not the size of its current generation of fighters but its potential to gain supporters from the local community in the future.

THE SOURCES OF STRENGTH

The power of a militant group such as Hamas does not come from the typical material factors that analysts use to judge the might of states—including the size of their economy, the technological sophistication of their militaries, how much external support they enjoy, and the strength of their educational systems. Rather, the most crucial source of power of Hamas and other militant nonstate actors commonly referred to as “terrorist” or “insurgent” groups is the ability to recruit, especially its ability to attract new generations of the fighters and operatives who carry out the group's lethal campaigns and are likely to die for the cause. And that ability to recruit is rooted, ultimately, in a single factor: the scale and intensity of support a group derives from its community.

The backing of a community allows a terrorist group to replenish its ranks, gain resources, avoid detection, and generally have more access to the human and material resources necessary to mobilize and sustain lethal campaigns of violence. Most terrorists, including Islamist groups in the Middle East, are walk-in volunteers, often either angry over the loss of family members or friends or more generally enraged at a powerful state's use of heavy military force. These people often seek out recruiters whose identity could be revealed to security forces were it not for the willingness of community members to protect them. Terrorist groups tend to fight with weapons that have been either made by refashioning civilian materials or seized from state security forces, often with intelligence and assistance provided by members of the local community.

Most important, the support of a community is necessary for fostering a cult of martyrdom. People are less likely to volunteer for high-risk missions if their sacrifices go unnoticed. A community that honors the fallen fighters of a terrorist group helps sustain it; martyrdom legitimizes terrorist actions and encourages new recruits. Terrorists will act as they see fit, but it is the community that ultimately decides whether an individual's sacrifice is accorded high status or whether it is broadly viewed as irrational, criminal, and worthy of contempt.

It is no surprise that terrorist groups often go to great lengths to curry favor with local communities. By embedding in social institutions, such as schools, universities, charities, and religious congregations, terrorist groups become a part of the fabric of communities, better able to win more recruits and the support of noncombatants.

Many cases showcase these dynamics. Hezbollah flourished with growing popular support among Shiites during the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon from 1982 to 1999, evolving from a small clandestine terrorist group into a mainstream political party with an armed wing of around 40,000 fighters today. Strong community support powered the prolonged terrorist campaigns of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, the Shining Path in Peru, the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) and al Qaeda in multiple countries.

Losing the support of a community can be devastating for terrorist groups. Following the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003, the number of fighters in the Sunni insurgency grew from 5,000 in the spring of 2004 to 20,000 by the fall of 2004 to 30,000 in February 2007, according to U.S. estimates. The more people the United States killed, the faster the insurgency grew. Indeed, the insurgency did not collapse until the United States shifted to a new approach, offering political and economic incentives to encourage Sunni tribes to oppose the terrorists. That shift ultimately decimated the insurgency, as the loss of local community support led to mass defections, actionable intelligence, and the rise of Sunni opposition forces called the Anbar Awakening. By 2009, the insurgency had virtually collapsed for one major reason: the loss of community support made it impossible for the terrorists to replenish their ranks.

HEARTS AND MINDS

These dynamics help account for Hamas's staying power in its war with Israel. To assess the group's true strength, analysts should consider the various dimensions of its support among Palestinians. These include its popularity as compared with its political rivals, the extent to which Palestinians view Hamas's violence against Israeli civilians as acceptable, and how many Palestinians have lost family members in the ongoing Israeli invasion of Gaza. These factors, more than material ones, provide the best gauge of Hamas's power to conduct a protracted terrorist campaign going forward.

Surveys of Palestinian opinion can help assess the extent of community support for Hamas. To account for the challenges of surveying the population in Gaza since October 7, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), a polling organization established in 1993 after the Oslo accords that collaborates with Israeli institutions, included interviews of displaced people in temporary shelters and roughly doubled the usual number of interviewed respondents given the uncertain and changing population distributions in the territory.

Five PSR surveys from June 2023 to the most recent, completed in June 2024, present a striking finding: on virtually every measure, Hamas has more support among Palestinians today than before October 7.

Political support for Hamas has grown, especially compared with its competitors. For instance, although Hamas and its main rival, Fatah, enjoyed roughly equivalent levels of support in June 2023, by June 2024 twice as many Palestinians supported Hamas (40 percent compared with 20 percent for Fatah).

The Israeli offensive is not turning Palestinians against Hamas.

Israel's bombing and ground invasion of Gaza has neither dampened Palestinian support for attacks against Israeli civilians inside Israel nor markedly depressed support for the October 7 attack itself. In March 2024, 73 percent of Palestinians believed Hamas was right to launch the October 7 attack. These numbers are extremely high, not only after the attacks spurred Israel's brutal campaign but also in light of the fact that a lower number, 53 percent, of Palestinians supported armed attacks on Israeli civilians in September 2023.

Hamas is enjoying a "rally round the flag" moment, helping explain why Gazans are not providing more intelligence to Israeli forces about the whereabouts of Hamas leaders and Israeli hostages. Support for armed attacks against Israeli civilians appears to have risen especially among Palestinians in the West Bank, which is now rightly on par with the consistently high levels of support for these attacks in Gaza, showing that Hamas has made extensive gains across Palestinian society since October 7.

The survey data also shows how Israel's military campaign has affected Palestinians. As of March 2024, the weight of the perceived price of the war on the Palestinian population is remarkably high. Sixty percent of Palestinians in Gaza report having a family member killed in the current war, while over three-quarters report having a family member killed or injured, both numbers significantly higher than in December 2023. This punishment is not having a significant deterrent effect among Palestinians, failing to reduce their support for armed attacks against

Israeli civilians and their support for Hamas.

Before October 7, Hamas had plateaued as a political force and, if anything, was in decline. The group feared that its cause—and the plight of the Palestinians more broadly—was being sidelined by the Abraham Accords, agreements that sought to normalize ties between Israel and Arab countries. Before its brazen assault on Israel on October 7, Hamas reckoned with a future of irrelevance, with Palestinians having fewer and fewer reasons to support the group.

After October 7, Palestinian support for Hamas has surged, to the detriment of Israel's security. Yes, Israel has killed many thousands of Hamas fighters in Gaza. But these losses in the current generation of fighters are already being offset by the rise in support for Hamas and the group's consequent ability to better recruit the next generation. In the meantime, until those new recruits arrive, all signs indicate that Hamas's current fighters are likely more eager than ever to wage protracted guerrilla warfare against any Israeli targets they can strike.

THE POWER OF THE MESSAGE

The tremendous punishment Israel has unleashed on Gaza is surely driving many Palestinians to feel further enmity toward the Jewish state. But why is Hamas benefiting from this reaction? After all, its attack was the immediate cause of the war that has leveled large swaths of Gaza and killed so many people.

The answer lies in large part in Hamas's sophisticated propaganda campaign, which constructs a favorable interpretation of events and weaves narratives that help the group win more supporters. To paraphrase the American psychoanalyst Edward Bernays, propaganda works not so much by creating and instilling fear and outrage as it does by redirecting these emotions toward concrete objectives. Hamas's efforts are a prime example of this tactic. Since the war began, the group has disseminated a vast amount of material, mostly online, in a bid to rally the Palestinian people around its leadership and its pursuit of victory against Israel.

The Arabic Propaganda Analysis Team—a dedicated group of Arabic linguists who specialize in gathering and analyzing militant propaganda in Arabic—at the University of Chicago Project on Security and Threats examined the Arabic propaganda produced by Hamas and its military wing, the Qassam Brigades, and distributed on the brigades' official Telegram channel in the aftermath of October 7. This Telegram channel, which has over 500,000 subscribers, has released messages, images, videos, and other propaganda virtually every day since the October 7 attacks. A report by Mohamed Elgohari, the leader of this research team, parsed over 500 bits of propaganda from October 7, 2023, to May 27, 2024. It is not known how many Palestinians consume this material online, but Gaza

and the West Bank have daily, albeit intermittent, Internet access. Hamas's digital content mirrors its analog propaganda efforts in local community networks.

The material centers on three themes: the Palestinian people have no choice but to fight because Israel is bent on committing unspeakable atrocities against all Palestinians even if they are not involved in military operations; under Hamas's leadership, Palestinians can defeat Israel on the battlefield; and those fighters who die in battle will be accorded honor and glory. Hamas has posted a vast number of videos, statements, and other material to make the case that its attack on Israel on October 7 was a necessary and justified response to Israeli occupation, atrocities, and aggression against the Palestinian people, including frequent incursions into the sacred al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem by Israeli security forces and Israeli activists and settlers.

Consider a Hamas statement originally posted on January 22 and widely circulated even in Israeli media. This extensive declaration explains in depth the group's justifications for attacking Israel, focusing on what it describes as long-standing grievances about the actions of the Israeli government and settlers, including Israeli intrusions at al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and restrictions placed on Palestinian worshipers there; the continued expansion of settlements in the West Bank; the allegedly horrific treatment meted out to Palestinian detainees in Israel; and Israel's functional siege and blockade of Gaza and imposition of apartheid-like policies in the West Bank. This statement is just one of dozens of posts making similar points.

Many videos, images, and posters emphasize Hamas's military prowess, showcasing successful attacks on Israeli targets, particularly armored vehicles and tanks. These posts aim to project the group's strength and effectiveness, suggesting that Hamas can inflict significant damage on its technologically superior adversary. In this propaganda, fighters appear in full combat gear and tactical uniforms, equipped with helmets, goggles, and advanced weaponry, highlighting their operational readiness. Religious symbolism, such as Koranic verses, also features heavily, casting Hamas's struggle as a spiritual one. Propaganda helps elevate fallen fighters to the status of martyrs, who died fighting Israel in the service of a noble and divinely sanctioned cause. The glorification of their martyrdom inspires potential new recruits.

Hamas's propaganda since October 7 is squarely in line with the results found in the PSR surveys of Palestinian attitudes. The tight fit between the substance of Hamas's propaganda and the growing support found for Hamas in particular and for armed struggle against Israel in general in the PSR surveys suggests that either Hamas is stimulating that support or its propaganda reflects the key reasons for that support. Either way, Hamas is capitalizing on the war to grow stronger through the thickening and widening bonds between the community and the militant group.

THE STARK REALITY

After nine months of grueling war, it is time to recognize the stark reality: there is no military-only solution to defeat Hamas. The group is more than the sum of its current number of fighters. It is also more than an evocative idea. Hamas is a political and social movement with violence at its core, and it is not going away any time soon.

Israel's current strategy of heavy military operations may kill some Hamas fighters, but this strategy is only strengthening the bonds between Hamas and the local community. For nine months, Israel has pursued virtually unfettered military operations in Gaza, with little evident progress toward any of its objectives. Hamas is neither defeated nor on the verge of defeat, and its cause is more popular and its appeal stronger than before October 7. In the absence of a plan for the future of Gaza and the Palestinian people that Palestinians might accept, the terrorists will keep coming back and in larger numbers.

But Israeli leaders appear no more willing to conceive of such a viable political plan than they were before October 7. There is little end in sight to the tragedy continuing to unfold in Gaza. The war will go on and on, more Palestinians will die, and the threat to Israel will only grow.