

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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## What Israel Must Do

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Disarming Hamas Will Be Costly but Essential for  
Peace

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**I**n launching its unprovoked, heinous attack on Israelis on October 7, Hamas created the bloodiest day that Israel has seen in more than five decades. The vast majority of the more than 900 killed were civilians—gunned down in their homes or burned to death as their houses were set on fire. Scores of hostages were taken, including grandmothers and mothers with young children, in an act of deliberate terror and brutality. This unprecedented assault has left Israel in a state of shock but also with the resolve to end Hamas’s ability to threaten Israel again, and it will inevitably produce an extraordinary response. In setting off what will by necessity be an overwhelming onslaught on the Gaza Strip, Hamas has brought to a new level the punishment of Palestinians that it has inflicted over and over for nearly two decades.

This situation could have been different. In September 2005, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon ordered the withdrawal of all Israeli soldiers and settlers from the Gaza Strip. The historic decision to leave meant that Palestinians could finally determine the fate of Gaza. It was a hopeful moment. For decades, Gaza’s destiny had been shaped by others; now Gazans themselves were in charge. It seemed possible to imagine a future

in which Gazan leaders transformed the strip from an incubator of terrorism into a prototype for a peaceful, modernizing, and stable Palestinian state.

But Hamas rejected that path. Despite the departure of Israeli troops and settlers, Hamas kept up its attacks on Israel, hitting the Gaza-Israel crossing points multiple times in the first six months after withdrawal. These crossing points were vital for the flow of goods and people into and out of Gaza, and they benefited Palestinians, not Israelis. Yet Hamas's attacks led Israel to reduce the number of crossing points from six to two. The Palestinians of Gaza were paying the price for Hamas's actions.

Despite Hamas's attacks at the crossings, Israel did not impose a blockade on Gaza until Hamas's de facto takeover of the strip in 2007. A year earlier, Hamas had defeated its Palestinian rival Fatah in an election, but because it refused to accept the conditions of the Quartet (the European Union, Russia, the United Nations, and the United States) for recognition—renouncing violence, accepting the Oslo agreements, and recognizing Israel—Washington and most European countries refused to deal with Hamas or provide it assistance. Then, in June 2007, Hamas ousted the Palestinian Authority and Fatah in a military coup, seizing Gaza's governing institutions and causing Israel to close border crossings, as well as air and sea access to the strip. Once more, Palestinians suffered.

Hamas seems to specialize in making Palestinians pay. Since taking power in Gaza, it has provoked conflicts with Israel in 2008–9, 2012, 2014, and 2021—with more limited skirmishes with the Israelis in the years between. Aside from consolidating its control, Hamas's main agenda for Gaza is building its own military infrastructure and arsenal. It has constructed dozens of miles of underground tunnels—not to provide shelters for the people of Gaza but to protect its own fighters and weapons. The cement, steel, copper, wood, and electrical wiring that has been lavished on this vast subterranean network could have been used above ground, to serve and develop one of the poorest and most densely populated areas in the world. But Hamas's priority is destroying Israel, not building Gaza. Hamas's ideological aims are negative, not positive ones that might help Palestinians.

Now Israel must contemplate difficult and far-reaching steps. It can no longer be satisfied with a punishing response, followed by a return to the status quo. The assumption that Israel could live with Hamas and manage periodic conflicts with it has been shattered. It is determined that Hamas will never again be able to threaten the Israeli people. Israelis across the political spectrum now believe that Hamas must be destroyed as a military power and that Gaza must be demilitarized. Israel will no longer accept a truce with Hamas.

#### NO MORE CEASE-FIRES

Each conflict that Hamas has provoked with Israel has left Gaza worse off. Hamas has regarded every cease-fire negotiated with Israel as an opportunity to buy time to rebuild its arsenal and get ready for the next round. Hamas is not a partner for peace; it is an agent of war and destruction. Talk of a Marshall Plan for Gaza has never been credible because international donors and investors know that whatever is built is likely to be destroyed the next time Hamas decides to trigger a new conflict with the Israelis.

If there were any doubts about Hamas's intentions in the past, its October 7 attack has permanently laid them to rest. The Israeli political and military establishment believed that Hamas's interest in preserving an economic floor—and the need for Gazans to work in Israel—gave them a stake in preserving relative calm with Israel and avoiding major conflicts. That assumption proved to be wrong. Carrying out a brutal massacre of hundreds of unarmed civilians, Hamas has shown that it is governed by violence alone and has no vision of the future.

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Hamas is a terrorist group. It has no positive agenda. It will not produce a Palestinian state. It imposes a terrible life on Gazans and now it has subjected them to a devastating Israeli onslaught. Notwithstanding the Israeli government's calls for Gazans to leave certain parts of the strip and go to designated safe areas, the population density—and Hamas's conscious effort to embed itself in population centers—all but guarantees that

innocent Gazans will be killed. That is a tragedy, but not for Hamas. It actively seeks such casualties to stigmatize Israel and to bring international pressure on the government, to try to delegitimize Israel's right to defend itself and to keep it on the defensive.

But Hamas has gravely miscalculated this time. Israel's leaders are now contemplating options that they have not been prepared to consider since the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Hamas has taken as many as 130 Israeli hostages to Gaza—and no doubt intense efforts have already begun to locate and rescue them. But Israel is unlikely to consider trades at this time, and it will certainly not pursue early cease-fires that could only benefit Hamas. Israel's 10/7 is going to produce a response similar to the United States' after 9/11. Decapitating Hamas's leadership, destroying its military infrastructure, killing a large number of its fighters, and even occupying Gaza again are very real objectives.

These goals are far greater than those of previous antiterrorism campaigns and will be enormously difficult to achieve. But repeating the old approach to Hamas's attacks—enacting retribution and then entering cease-fire agreements—will only lead to future violence. Israel will not countenance that. Moreover, Israel's leaders also understand that their readiness to pay a high price is necessary for them to reestablish their deterrence of Iran and its proxies. The tragic reality is that for the Israeli military to root out Hamas's military infrastructure and leadership the cost will be high both for Palestinians in Gaza and for Israeli soldiers. Having adopted the tactics of al Qaeda, Hamas bears the responsibility for the deaths of Palestinians and Israelis alike—and it is critically important that the result helps to ensure that such a difficult operation is never required again.

#### A WAR FOR THE FUTURE

The Biden administration has pledged to support Israel and affirmed its right to self-defense. But the longer the conflict continues, Israel will face growing pressure to end it. As the toll in Gaza mounts, some Western and Arab leaders will likely argue that Israeli military action is disproportionate. It is fair to ask what is proportional when confronting a

group that deliberately kills the innocent, takes women and children hostage, and uses every cease-fire to prepare for the next set of attacks. If Hamas retains any ability to threaten Israel, it will present itself as the victor, and that will be a tremendous boost to radical and destabilizing forces across the region that embrace violence and reject peace.

Israel should permit food and medicine to go to the safe areas it has already designated for Gazans. It has no interest in creating more Palestinian refugees or essentially driving them into Egypt, and it can show the world that it is fighting a war of necessity to disarm Hamas and not seeking to punish Palestinian civilians. Western and Arab leaders have a responsibility to support Israel's campaign against Hamas even as they frame essential objectives for during and after the fighting: unconditional release of the hostages and an end to Hamas rockets, mortars, and weapons- and bomb-making facilities. Aid for reconstruction of Gaza must be tied to demilitarization of the strip. For Israel this is the minimum, and its military onslaught may well succeed in largely destroying all or most of Hamas's military infrastructure. Certainly, Israel is not likely to stop until Hamas has been largely disarmed and there are mechanisms in place to ensure that it cannot rearm. Israel's endgame is making sure that Hamas cannot threaten it again.

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The unconditional release of hostages and the demilitarization of Gaza could produce that outcome and avoid yet further devastation. Yes, Hamas and its backers in Tehran will resist these steps, but Western governments and the United Nations, and especially Arab states that have a direct stake in Gaza's future, should exert strong pressure for them. Indeed, as the fate of the strip becomes increasingly grim, Arab leaders in particular could embrace demilitarization as a way to save the Palestinians of Gaza.

Of course, it is possible that at high cost, Israel might succeed in rooting out the Hamas leadership, decapitating it, and destroying much of its military infrastructure. Should it accomplish those tasks, Israel will not want to stay in Gaza, and will look to turn over governance of the territory

to a transitional authority under an international umbrella. Who would form such an authority? What role would the UN play? Is there some combination of regional and nonregional actors who could assume responsibilities?

These are difficult questions. The Palestinian Authority will not want it to seem that it returned to the strip on the back of Israeli tanks, but if asked by the UN to play a role it might do so—and would also seek some Arab cover. Arab governments could provide that cover, and contribute to international pressure to help manage that transition, with Egypt's proximity making it a natural partner, along with some credible European governments that have experience in reconstruction and enforcement efforts.

There are more questions than answers for what would follow the displacement of Hamas from Gaza, assuming that is possible. But these questions remind us that at some point this war will end, and that there will be a day after, and that ultimately a better future must be built for the ordinary Palestinians of Gaza themselves, who have suffered so long under Hamas control. The Biden administration and its international partners would be wise to formulate plans for different possible outcomes. But there must be one proviso: that Hamas is not in a position to threaten Israel ever again.