

## THE WAR IN GAZA: STUCK IN THE ABYSS?

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*Six months since October 7 the Israeli military campaign in Gaza is resulting in a humanitarian catastrophe, absolute devastation on the ground, and risks a wider regional war. At the same time, it has offered little hope of a strategy to secure meaningful security and peace for Israelis and Palestinians.*



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Six months after Hamas's **brutal attacks** on Israel and Israel's resulting war on Gaza, the only clear outcome is despair, destruction and a pathway that is sucking Israel, Palestinians and the wider region into an ever more dangerous morass. Gaza has been reduced to a **wasteland**, while **regional tensions** now stand at their most perilous since the outbreak of violence.

While some hoped that the tragedy of October 7 could usher in an **opportunity** to revive prospects for political negotiations towards a two-state solution – on the basis that this is ultimately the only way to guarantee mutual rights and security – the brutal nature of the ongoing conflict is instead fundamentally closing down the space for renewed deal-making. Despite the necessary solution to the crisis appearing clear – a ceasefire, the release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners, the return of a reformed Palestinian body to Gaza in place of Hamas, and an internationally-backed political track towards a two-state solution – movement in this direction has been fatally hamstrung.

A temporary ceasefire may soon finally come into view, but a solution that sustainably ends the fighting and opens up a broader pathway towards meaningful peace remains very far off.

The acute urgency of the situation today is desperately clear. Hamas's October 7 attacks, in which the group killed more than **1,100 Israelis** and seized **253 hostages**, of which 34 have since died and around 100 are still held captive, unleashed a devastating cycle of violence that shows no signs of abating. Israel's assault on Gaza has already killed more than **33,000 Palestinians**, including **nearly 14,000 children**, while **displacing 1.7 million Palestinians**. Gaza now lies in ruin and stands on the brink of **famine**.

But for all the violence, an Israeli military victory remain elusive, a reality driving Israel's desire to expand the conflict with an incursion into **Rafah**. Israel has **failed to kill much of Hamas's senior leadership**, with the group's ability to sink into its tunnel network and the wider population providing enduring defensive depth – an outcome that is unlikely to change with a wider campaign in southern Gaza.

Hamas will clearly pay a heavy price for October 7. In addition to Israel's ongoing military offensive, Israel and Western countries will do all they can to ensure it is unable to ever govern again. The prospect of increased international engagement, something Hamas previously sought, has also evaporated. Whatever happens in Gaza, Israel will continue to hunt down Hamas leaders for years to come. But the group will nonetheless **survive on the ground** and remain a force that has to be reckoned with, not least because of the deafening silence emanating from the West Bank. The delegitimised Palestinian Authority (PA) under President Mahmoud Abbas has failed to demonstrate any credible leadership, let alone much needed meaningful **internal reform**, in response to the ongoing catastrophe. This has strengthened Hamas's narrative that armed resistance is the sole means of responding to Israeli oppression and pressing the Palestinian cause on the international agenda. **Polls** show that a majority of Palestinians still back Hamas.

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This outcome is partly a result of Israel's strategic response to Hamas's brutal attacks. Since October 7, Israel has embraced a single-minded focus on an overwhelming military response, one which essentially conflates all Palestinians with Hamas. Its Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has made clear that he **rejects** negotiations and the **establishment of a Palestinian state**, closing down one key track that might marginalise Hamas and thereby better guarantee Israeli security. Nor has Israel offered a viable vision of an alternative day-after scenario beyond stating that it **will not accept a return of PA rule to Gaza** and that it will **retain security control**. Israel's right-wing government has instead focused on further **subverting the PA**, **green-lighting increased landgrabs** in the West Bank and hinting at ambitions to **resettle Gaza**, pointing to a sharp focus on using this moment to assert Israeli ascendancy.

Wider Israeli public sentiment has also **hardened** considerably amid the trauma of October 7, with **strong ongoing support** for the military campaign (even if there is growing backing for a short-term hostage deal). While some international observers hold out the hope of an Israeli shift of policy on Gaza if Netanyahu is dislodged from power – as a **majority** of Israelis now want – the country's uncompromising position towards the Palestinians increasingly appears to be a **national consensus position**.

To many, this approach appears fatal to Israel's strategic interests given that a sustainable solution will inevitably necessitate a pathway for Palestinians to secure their own rights to live in dignity and peace. It is also resulting in unprecedented Israeli **international isolation** amid mounting global anger with its military campaign and the associated humanitarian crisis. This includes a **ruling** by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) stating that it is plausible that Israel's acts could amount to genocide. While this has been balanced by largely unconditional support from key Western governments, notably the US and Germany, that have provided Israel with extensive political cover, including multiple **US vetoes** of UN Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire, and ongoing **military support**, Israel's number of backers is shrinking quickly.

International concern is partly driven by **intensifying regional tensions** which now, more than at any other point since October 7, risk a wider conflict. While Houthi missile strikes on the Red Sea aroused an **international response** to keep maritime routes open, it is the prospect of war with Iran which is raising most **unease**. Fighting between the Iranian-backed Lebanese militant group, Hezbollah, and Israel is at its most **intense** since the 2006 war and the long-running shadow conflict between Israel and Iran is quickly coming into direct focus. Israel's **recent attack** on the Iranian consulate in Damascus and a string of high-level assassinations risk provoking a direct response from Tehran that could lead to a devastating regional unravelling. Israel seemingly believes that Iran is being successfully deterred by military action and Tehran has **said** it is not seeking a wider war. But without rapid regional-de-escalation – which Hezbollah and Iran state **can only occur in tandem with a sustained ceasefire in Gaza** – Tehran is likely to eventually feel compelled to respond more forcefully to Israeli attacks to maintain the credibility of its deterrence posture.

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Altogether, the outlook is dire. President Biden's recent willingness to **press Israel** to facilitate greater humanitarian access into Gaza and do more to secure a ceasefire opens up at some prospects for progress (though a temporary ceasefire tied to hostage releases will still struggle to gain Hamas's support given that the hostages remain its key source of leverage to secure a permanent end to the fighting).

But questions remain about how meaningful this US shift really is. President Biden has simultaneously been unwilling to condition **arms flows**, the key source of US leverage, on a change in Israeli behaviour as many are demanding. Until this occurs Israel is unlikely to feel real

pressure to shift course. And, with the possibility of a new Trump presidency on the horizon, an administration that is likely to take an even less compromising position towards the Palestinians, Netanyahu and his right-wing government may be incentivised to press ahead with their current approach and be even **less cooperative with the US**. At the same, there is still insufficient wider consideration of how to secure meaningful Palestinian political reform – beyond **symbolic changes of government** – and how to manage the dilemma of ensuring Hamas is removed from a security and governance role, while acknowledging that it will inevitably remain part of the Palestinian landscape in the coming period. These dilemmas, on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides, cannot be ignored if there is to be any hope of preventing the situation from sinking deeper into the abyss.