Feature Commentary: Red Teaming Hamas' Options

By Brian Michael Jenkins

This article examines alternate strategies that Hamas might pursue in the next stage of the Gaza peace plan. Taking a "red team" approach, it does so from the perspective of the organization's leaders, analyzing how they might assess Hamas' current situation, what imperatives drive its strategy, and how they might envision its future course of action. Three options are explored: a confrontational approach, a peaceful pathway, and a flexible and opportunistic strategy. No prediction is made as to which one Hamas may choose, and we could see combinations of measures from all three. The situation is fluid and dangerous to Hamas, and the choices are existential. Hamas leaders themselves may not know—or agree with each other on—what they will do. The purpose of the article is to inspire further red team analysis to open up our own thinking, avoid surprises, and explore creative responses.

Magnus Ranstorp's comprehensive review of Hamas, which appeared in the October 2025 issue of *CTC Sentinel,* concludes with the question, "Where does Hamas go from here?"[1] In that spirit, this essay offers a necessarily speculative inquiry into Hamas' current options. It has been more than three months since Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire, release of hostages and Palestinian prisoners, and partial Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. The next steps in U.S. President Donald Trump's 20-point Gaza Peace Plan—the deployment of an International Stabilization Force (ISF), disarmament and demobilization of Hamas, and complete withdrawal of Israel Defense Forces (IDF)—are predictably more difficult. In two previous essays, I examined why these would be high hurdles[2] and offered options for how they might be carried out.[3] This article explores the same issues, but adopts a 'red team' approach to examine them from the perspective of Hamas: How might Hamas assess its current situation? What imperatives drive its strategy? What are its options?

Part One describes red teaming and how it has evolved over the years from strategic Cold War games to assessing terrorist adversaries. Part Two posits how Hamas may evaluate its own circumstances, examines the imperatives that will drive its decisions, and looks for clues in what Hamas has said and done since agreeing to the October 2025 ceasefire.

Hamas' initial actions suggest a confrontational approach, an option that is described in Part Three. Conceivably, Hamas could adopt a more peaceful posture—a *hudna* (Arabic for 'calm')—that accepts, for the foreseeable future, the necessity of suspending its armed struggle. This option is outlined in Part Four. Part Five describes a "flexible and opportunistic strategy," not as a compromise between defiance and docility, but reflecting uncertainty in a still fluid situation.

Part One: A 'Red Team' Approach

The idea of studying the enemy's intentions and capabilities is not new. In *The Art of War*, written 2,500 years ago, the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu famously observed that "if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles."[4] By *knowing* the enemy, Sun Tzu meant something broader than the enemy's order of battle. Knowing included identifying enemy strengths and weaknesses, patterns of behavior, intentions, strategy, and tactics. It also required *thinking like the enemy* to understand his values, motives, and psychology.

In recent centuries, war planners deployed red forces (representing the enemy) and blue forces (representing the friendly forces) to maneuver against each other in mock wars. These field exercises were training exercises that focused on military operations. They might lead to surprises, but they were not red teaming as we currently understand the technique.

It was not until the Cold War that ideology and motivations—*knowing* the enemy—again became critical components of red team analysis. Kremlinologists sought to understand how Russian history, and communist ideology, might affect Soviet decision-making.[5] The objective was deterring the Soviet Union from initiating a catastrophic nuclear war. Warfighting pushes red team analysis toward strategy and tactics. War prevention pushes analysts toward mindsets and motivations.

The rise of contemporary terrorism in the 1970s pushed analysts to better understand terrorist mindsets and decision-making. This was exceptionally challenging. Terrorist attacks were not preceded by potentially observable military buildups, making them hard to predict. And many of the threats made and plots discovered are aspirational. Red teams do not predict terrorist behavior, but they can alert us to surprises and help prevent "failures of imagination."

Terrorist mindsets are alien to most ordinary people. As a 2008 manual for intelligence analysts produced by the Defense Intelligence Agency notes, "Red Team analysis is aimed at freeing

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the analysts from the prison of … the analyst's own sense of rationality, cultural norms, and personal values."[6]

Extremist groups, often led by a single charismatic leader, may take actions that seem illogical by conventional standards. Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel, which would predictably provoke a massive Israeli counterattack, bringing death and destruction to thousands of Gazans, offers an example. Did Hamas merely miscalculate, or did the bloodshed serve its long-term goals by guaranteeing continuing hatred and support for the resistance? This kind of question illustrates the challenges of analyzing terrorist behavior and the dangers of overconfidence in the results.

Red Teaming in Israel

Israel has faced the same challenges. Reflecting a deeply embedded Talmudic tradition that encourages arguing different viewpoints, Israel has created mechanisms to encourage divergent analysis. Miri Eisin, the former deputy head of Israel's Combat Intelligence Corps, has observed that "as terrorism and counterterrorism experts … you have to think like the other side. That's part of how you counter it."[7]

To prevent a recurrence of the intelligence failure that left Israel caught by surprise in the 1973 October War, an Israeli commission of inquiry "recommended establishing a mechanism and nurturing a culture focused on critical thinking, thus avoiding unitary assessments and groupthink inside the IDI [Israeli Defense Intelligence]."[8] This led to the creation of a special unit in the Military Intelligence Directorate known as the *Ipcha Mistraba* (Aramaic for 'Devil's Advocate') Unit.[9]

According to Israeli sources, over time, confidence in Israel's Devil's Advocate Unit experienced a gradual erosion of confidence within the system, largely because it came to be perceived as reflexively challenging prevailing assessments, sometimes only because that is how it interpreted its duty and not because of available contrary evidence.

Still, in the weeks before Hamas' October 7 attacks, the Devil's Advocate Unit and other Israeli intelligence units attempted to highlight signs of increased Hamas assertiveness and question the assumption that Hamas was deterred by Israel's likely military response and therefore would maintain quiet in Gaza, but instead would soon launch an operation.[10] Israel, in other words, was not thinking like Hamas. These views did not gain sufficient traction at senior levels.

In both the 1973 October War and the 2023 Hamas attack, confidence in the overwhelming military superiority of the IDF led to missing the point that the adversaries' calculations would not be driven by assessments of military outcomes, but by political, psychological and, in the case of Hamas, even divine inspiration.

Understanding terrorists to improve analysis should not be confused with being *understanding* of terrorists—that is, being tolerant of their behavior. Red team analysis in no way condones the conduct of Hamas. Hamas' ultimate goal remains the destruction of Israel as a Jewish state. It exults in slaughter. It instructed its fighters on October 7 to kill, slit throats, take hostages, and document the scenes of horror—it was choreographed cruelty to create terror. Colonel Eisin was surprised by two aspects of the October 7 attacks: the breadth of the planning and the unthinkable atrocities.[11]

Slaughter and savagery, however, does not mean Hamas leaders are mere mindless killers. They have demonstrated their ability to assess and adapt to changing situations. Their worldview and mindset will determine how Hamas assesses its situation and views its options. Understanding these perspectives is essential to red teaming.

Part Two: Imagining How Hamas Might Assess its Situation

How Hamas assesses its current situation, what lessons it takes away from the recent and past conflicts, and what Hamas sees as its imperatives will shape its decisions going forward.

The Current Situation as Seen by Hamas

Although grateful for the respite, few on either side of the Israel-Palestinian conflict believe that this will be the last round of fighting. Both Hamas and Israel are preparing for renewed fighting.[12] Meanwhile, Israel is undoubtedly reviewing lessons learned during what it initially called "Operation Swords of Iron," but for symbolic and political reasons in October 2025 changed it to the "War of Redemption." Hamas commanders are likely also reviewing what they have learned from what they call "The Battle of al-Aqsa Flood," a reference to the initial attack on October 7, 2023, and Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

Hamas' chief negotiator portrayed the current ceasefire, pullback of Israeli forces, and release of Palestinian prisoners as a victory that demonstrated the organization's steadfastness and resilience.[13] Although Hamas managed to survive the massive Israeli offensive (while Gaza's population suffered terribly), it incurred unprecedented losses and its military capabilities were significantly weakened, although not eliminated entirely. As their strength declined, Hamas fighters were reduced to smaller-scale guerrilla operations but—protected by their vast tunnel system and the challenges of urban warfare—they were able to sustain a determined defense.

Estimates of Hamas' current strength vary significantly; statistics of irregular and hybrid wars are always foggy. Multiple Palestinian entities field uniformed troops in Gaza but also operate covertly. Civilian supporters augment their numbers but are difficult to count.

The estimated current strength of Hamas and allied Palestinian factions derives from three calculations: One is their strength at the outset of the war. In October 2023, the estimated number of fighters in Hamas' Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades was 25,000-40,000. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) was believed to have 4,000 fighters.[14] Other factions may add several thousand more.[15]

The total number of fighters killed during the two years of fighting comprises the second set of numbers. These range from a low of 6,000-7,000 (Hamas' estimate[16]) to 8,500 confirmed deaths (the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data estimate[17]) to 17,000-23,000 killed, including all groups (the IDF estimate[18]).

The third figure comprises replacement. Driven by desires for revenge and the loss of livelihoods during the conflict, U.S. sources estimate that Hamas was able to recruit 10,000-15,000 fighters to replace its losses.[19] That gives us a broad range of estimates of Hamas' current strength from 10,000-20,000 to 15,000-25,000, plus fighters from other groups. Moreover, Hamas has secured funding to pay these additional troops.[20]

These numbers have relevance since they will determine how many Hamas fighters may be expected to turn in their weapons. The uncertainty provides ample room for subterfuge. Disarming 10,000 fighters, for example, would look significant, but that potentially could leave thousands of undeclared fighters and an even greater number of weapons stashed for future use.

Destroyed houses in Nuseirat camp in the central Gaza Strip are pictured on December 26, 2025. (Majdi Fathi/NurPhoto via AP Photo)

Over 900 IDF soldiers were killed in the latest conflict, including those killed during the initial assault and subsequent fighting on the border and those killed during Israel's ground offensive in Gaza.[21] Whatever estimate one uses for Hamas casualties, this is a terrible loss exchange ratio for the group, especially given that Hamas was the defending force fighting from prepared positions connected by tunnels in a heavily urbanized environment where attacking ground forces often suffer heavy casualties.

Israeli operations were conducted in a manner intended to reduce friendly casualties. Nonetheless, the war resulted in 20,000 IDF soldiers suffering physical and psychological wounds, which will impose a heavy burden on Israeli society going forward.[22] Meanwhile, Hamas fought the war in a way that protected its fighters at the expense of civilian casualties. Hamas portrays the tens of thousands of Gazan civilians killed during the war as martyrs—victims of Israeli genocide, a charge that gained some traction internationally.[23] The loss of so many lives also fuels motivation for revenge, which Hamas will exploit, although some Gazans hold Hamas responsible for bringing death and destruction to Gaza.

Hamas' Rocket Arsenal

It is not clear how Hamas might evaluate the future utility of its rockets. In an effort to overwhelm Israel's Iron Dome air defense system, Hamas and other Palestinian groups in Gaza fired 4,300 rockets on Israel during their initial assault on October 7.[24] By October 2025, the total number of rockets fired climbed to over 13,000. The Iron Dome generally knocks down over 90 percent of the rockets it fires at;[25] it does not waste its limited supply of missiles to shoot down rockets it calculates are headed for unpopulated areas.

Hamas fired thousands of rockets on October 7, overwhelming Iron Dome defenses and resulting in 12 deaths—one percent of the total fatalities during the initial ground attack—and dozens of injuries.[26] After the October 7 barrage, nine more Israelis died as a result of rockets fired from Gaza.[27] The ground assault and continuing rocket barrage forced the evacuation of surrounding towns, caused economic disruption, and took a psychological toll on Israeli society. Firing rockets also provides a means for other groups and individuals to participate in the resistance and may lift the morale of those under Israeli bombing.

Hamas will have to decide whether these returns are worth the effort, or if Hamas could afford to give up its rockets in a compromise that allows Hamas fighters to keep their basic infantry weapons. Even with a disarmament agreement, Hamas will likely try to conceal some of its rockets as a reserve; finding and accounting for all of them will be difficult. And will Gaza's other factions give up their rockets? If it gives up its rockets, will Hamas then look for unconventional ways to cripple Israel's economy or avenge the loss of lives in Gaza?

Rocket and missile fire would have made a dramatic difference had Hezbollah joined the battle, unleashing its vast arsenal of more powerful and precision-guided missiles. The damage to Israel would have been disastrous. As it turned out, Hezbollah responded

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cautiously, not launching its most powerful, long-range missiles and focusing mainly on military targets and towns in northern Israel.

Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar expected a robust response by Hezbollah and the Iranian proxies in the "Axis of Resistance" (but not Iran itself). He believed that Israeli Arabs would also join the attack.[28] Captured Hamas documents show that in a letter written to Hamas leader Ismael Haniyeh in 2022,[29] Sinwar laid out three scenarios: One involved a sudden confrontation from all fronts. The second scenario involved a more limited Hezbollah barrage, using a quarter to a third of its arsenal. The third scenario put the primary burden of battle on Hamas. Haniyeh reported back that Iran and Hezbollah endorsed the first scenario—a coordinated attack.

However, other captured documents suggest that while Iran and Hezbollah both endorsed the plan, they suggested delay, but Hamas proceeded with the operation.[30] We do not know if Hamas leaders were being deliberately misled, heard what they wanted to hear, or hoped that the others would be compelled to join once the war began; anticipation of massive support turned out to be a strategic miscalculation. In the days immediately after October 7, Iranian leaders denied any involvement in the planning of the attack.[31]

Hezbollah's limited intervention did not dissuade Israel from bombing Hezbollah targets and invading Lebanon in 2024, destroying much of its military infrastructure, approximately 80 percent of its arsenal of rockets, and most of its precision-guided missiles.[32] Israel also claims to have killed more than 2,500 fighters and assassinated 25 senior Hezbollah leaders, including Hassan Nasrallah, who had led the group since 1992. To prevent Hezbollah from rearming, Israel has continued attacking Hezbollah targets and targeting its leaders in spite of the year-old ceasefire agreement.

What will Hamas take away from Hezbollah's experience? Hezbollah's decision to avoid all-out war with Israel left Hamas on its own against Israel's offensive. Going forward, Hamas must reckon that in any future conflict, it cannot depend on allies and will be largely on its own.

However, Hezbollah's experience offers another lesson. Hezbollah agreed to a ceasefire with Israel in November 2024, roughly one year before Hamas' ceasefire with Israel. Since then, Israel has continued to conduct frequent airstrikes throughout Lebanon, ground operations, and targeted killings—Hezbollah's cautious response brought little respite. Similarly, Israel has continued airstrikes, artillery fire, and targeted killings of Hezbollah and Hamas leaders since the ceasefire. Taken together, the experience of Hezbollah and of Hamas since October 10, 2025, may reinforce arguments within Hamas against compliance and cooperation as they bring nothing.

Hamas' review of its situation goes beyond the parameters of conventional military calculations of military strength. Its armed brigades have demonstrated their steadfastness. Military casualty ratios are not the only criterion. It portrays not losing as winning.

Hamas also claims successes beyond the physical battlefield. In a review of its most prominent achievements in the recent war, Hamas claims, among other things, returning the Palestinian cause to the forefront on the world's attention; transforming world opinion; causing the collapse of Israel's image and its growing isolation internationally while bringing about growing international recognition of the State of Palestine; replacing the declining Zionist narrative with a global rise in the Palestinian narrative; exposing Israeli society's deep divisions; shattering the Israeli theory of deterrence and safe haven illusion; and derailing—in its own words—the "delusional" diplomatic normalization projects.[33]

Hamas' Imperatives

Self-preservation is the group's paramount imperative. Individual members require protection; organizational survival must be ensured; the reason for the group's existence must not be lost.

Gaza remains a rough, heavily armed neighborhood, and Hamas must worry not just about Israeli attacks, but about rival armed groups, criminal gangs, and other private parties that make seek vengeance.

Self-preservation requires maintaining its authority in Gaza. The social and political mosaic in Gaza is complicated with deep fissures. The cohesion seen during the war could easily descend into factional fighting as often happens in Palestinian resistance movements, especially given the level of destruction and the despair of the population. Intra-Palestinian battles emerged during the 1936 Arab revolt and again following Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005. This is a critical point, often missed in analysis: Hamas' immediate actions are not determined solely by the threat from Israel but by the threat from Hamas' near enemies in Gaza and the long-term risk of irrelevance.

Hamas sees itself, not the International Stabilizing Force, as the ultimate stabilizing force in post-ceasefire Gaza. As Mousa Abu Marzouk, a member of Hamas' political bureau, noted in an interview on October 25, 2025, "Some countries conditioned the rebuilding of Gaza on the exclusion of Hamas from the governing body. Do they even know what the exclusion of Hamas means? It could mean civil war. It could mean the destruction of Palestinian society. It could lead to infighting."[34]

Hamas is still the most powerful group, but its capacity has been reduced during the war. It must fend off challenges to its authority by local clans, criminal groups, and Israeli-backed militias, all of which are armed and have their own agendas. Hamas must also avoid losing leadership of the Palestinian resistance to its more extremist allies like PIJ.[a] Therefore, from its perspective, Hamas must avoid being disarmed and rendered irrelevant by enforcement

a Armed challenges to Hamas in Gaza fall into several categories: rival Palestinian resistance groups such as Fatah, PFLP, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (see Tom Bullock, "Q&A: Hamas and Fatah," NPR, June 19, 2007, and Erik Skare, *The History of Palestinian Islamic Jihad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)); salafi-jihadi groups (see Nathalie Boehler, "How Hamas' ideology of martyrdom led to the sacrifice of an entire population," *Times of Israel*, May 21, 2024); and anti-Hamas armed clans and militias, some of which are supported by Israel (see Giorgio Cafiero, "Gaza's Armed Fragmentation: Clans, Militias, and Rival Power Centers," Stimson Center, October 27, 2025; "Hamas is battling powerful clans for control in Gaza – who are these groups and what threat do they pose?" Conversation, October 15, 2025; and Ahmad Sharawi and Joe Truzman, "Profiles of anti-Hamas militias in the Gaza Strip," FDD's Long War Journal, October 19, 2025.)

of a peace plan that bars it from any participation in the future government of Gaza.

Hamas must also maintain the cohesion and morale of its fighters to prevent disillusion, desertion, or splintering. That means demonstrating that traitors to the cause will be severely punished, hence the public executions.[35] It also means that Hamas cannot easily order its own fighters to surrender their weapons or stand down indefinitely without any clear notion about their future.

To ensure continuing sympathy and support of its own members, the Palestinian people, and the 'Arab street,' Hamas must demonstrate its continuing commitment to its Covenant—the eventual liberation of occupied Palestine and return of all of the historical land of Palestine to Palestinian control. Hamas must also maintain its international lifelines—the vital financial assistance and diplomatic help provided by its principal foreign supporters: Qatar, Turkey, and Iran.[36] And Hamas probably does not want the United States to lose interest, engagement, and ability to both constrain and put pressure on Israel.

Demonstrating its Dominance

For the time being, in the part of Gaza not occupied by the IDF, Hamas is the dominant organization in the other 41 percent of the territory. Hamas continues to pay the salaries of 30,000 government employees in Gaza.[37] It runs Gaza's police department. It regulates commerce, collects taxes, and fines merchants that violate its price controls. Hamas' direct control over the delivering of humanitarian aid has been reduced, but as the dominant armed group in the part of Gaza not occupied by Israeli forces, it maintains a grip on its distribution. Hamas is not merely an armed group in Gaza; it is a civilization.

However, Hamas maintains its political power by being the largest and most powerful armed formation in Gaza. To assert its dominance, almost immediately following the announcement of the ceasefire agreement, Hamas displayed its strength by attacking armed clans[38] that challenged its control and carrying out public executions.[39]

The disarmament of Hamas would change the balance of power between Hamas and rival groups like PIJ that field thousands of fighters and, although they collaborate with Hamas, also have their own agendas. Disarmament would also expose Hamas to attacks by the armed clans and criminal gangs that inhabit Gaza. Without their weapons, Hamas fighters would likely be targets of individual attacks. It could, as Marzouk warned, lead to civil war.

Hamas did not officially sign President Trump's 20-point peace plan, but U.S. Special Envoy Steve Witkoff says that Hamas officials told him and unofficial White House aide Jared Kushner that the group "wanted to disarm."[40] Publicly, senior Hamas and PIJ officials have categorically denied this, saying that the resistance has not been defeated and "will not disarm," that any claim that they have agreed to this is "a complete lie, and that it was not even discussed with the negotiators." "The weapons remain as long as the [Israel's] occupation [of Palestine] continues." "Disarmament is not on the agenda and is out of the question."[41]

Whether this is public posturing or reflects unshakable determination remains to be seen. Arab mediators suggest that "Hamas could agree to hand over some of its weapons, as long as President Trump can guarantee Israel will not resume fighting."[42] Hamas has also said that it is not opposed to handing over part of its arsenal, but only as part of a Palestinian political process.[43]

Hamas rejected disarmament before in 2004 when it stated that under no circumstances would it relinquish its weapons. In an internal document, however, it noted that the Palestinian organization and factions could agree on a "*treatise of honor* in this matter that will handle the problematic nature and complexity of arms usage."[44] An Egyptian official recently reported that Hamas could agree to "freeze its weapons use but not surrender them."[45]

Uncompromising public statements coinciding with hints of flexibility conveyed to intermediaries (assuming the intermediaries are not simply floating their own initiatives) suggest that Hamas' public hardline could be a negotiating position. They could also reflect differences of opinion within the organization.

Ranstorp addresses these in his recent *CTC Sentinel* article.[46] He describes a hardline faction that believes Hamas can retain exclusive control of Gaza while counting on continuing aid from Qatar, Turkey, and Iran. This is essentially Option One described in the essay. Opposing this "pragmatist bloc"—which argues that faced with a lack of funding and eroding public support, Hamas can no longer govern Gaza and must reject armed struggle and reposition itself as a political party—is essentially Option Two. According to Ranstorp, Hamas has signaled openness to various arrangements, but "the crux remains the control of guns and security."[47]

It is noteworthy that the leader of the pragmatist bloc was born in the West Bank and has never resided in Gaza while the leader of the hardline faction is a Gazan and represents the "internal" group of Gaza. Both men are contenders in the upcoming internal election to select a new leader of Hamas' politburo, which is currently governed by a council of five members.[48]

Internal divisions are not the only possible explanation for Hamas' ambivalent statements on disarming. Hamas may be signaling that any flexibility on the issue of disarming is conditional on a guarantee from President Trump that Israel will not resume fighting and as part of a Palestinian political process to eventual statehood. Is Hamas probing the willingness of the United States to take a more categorical position on constraining Israel and guaranteeing political progress for the Palestinian people?

The reality is that Hamas has no air force, no air defenses. Hamas cannot prevent Israel from bombing targets in Gaza, which it has continued to do. Nor can Hamas prevent the resumption of an all-out air and ground offensive aimed at crushing the group once and for all. Of course, this is what Israel has been trying to do since the beginning of the war, but the idea that it can wipe out Hamas remains popular. Although Hamas has survived, the renewal of potentially less-constrained hostilities would be damaging.

If it can be formed and deployed, the presence of the International Stabilization Force (ISF) called for in the peace plan will complicate renewed attacks by Israel, but by itself is not enough to deter Israel from a major military offensive any more than the presence of a U.N. force has prevented Israel from invading and occupying Lebanon.

Nor can the presence of the ISF necessarily dissuade Israel from deciding to initiate a campaign of targeted killings to eliminate Hamas leaders and commanders. In addition to killing several senior Hamas leaders in Gaza during the conflict,[49] Israel killed another senior Hamas commander in Gaza after the ceasefire.[50] Israel also killed a Hamas leader in Iran and attempted to kill a group of Hamas officials in Qatar.[51]

Only U.S. pressure can theoretically constrain Israel. While the United States wants to maintain the ceasefire and get on with the

second phase of the peace plan, officially it still regards Hamas as a terrorist organization, and it has not promised protection for its leadership or fighters.

The signals from Washington have been mixed as the United States attempts to quell violence in Gaza, prevent a breakdown of the ceasefire, establish a functioning ISF, and maintain progress in the negotiations while satisfying the conflicting demands of the belligerents. It is a difficult path that requires extraordinary skill in diplomatic dodging and weaving. The history of brokering peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians is littered with the remains of plans that initially appeared promising, but broke down owing to irreconcilable differences.

Although Washington expressed public disapproval of Israel's September attack in Qatar, and on October 13, President Trump implied that Hamas had been given U.S. approval to act as an interim peace force in Gaza "for a period of time,"[52] he subsequently warned that if Hamas does not disarm, "we will disarm them, quickly and perhaps violently."[53] And on October 16, he warned that "we will have no choice but to go in and kill them" if the bloodshed in Gaza persists.[54] These sharp turns are to be expected. We do not know what messages are being quietly relayed to Israel, and if they are being delivered consistently.

How Hamas might navigate this dangerous course is the subject of the following three parts. Hamas has three broad options. It can hold on to its weapons and defy any challenge to its authority in Gaza, accepting that this could prompt further military action against it. Instead, in accordance with the peace plan, Hamas could disarm and demobilize, reverting to its Muslim Brotherhood origins as a social movement and political organization. Or Hamas could adopt a flexible strategy that maintains its commitment to its ultimate goals while adapting to changing circumstances. These are markers on a spectrum of postures. Each option comprises a bundle of possible actions that Hamas might select and blend depending on the situation.

Part Three: A Confrontational Approach

Public statements and actions since the declaration of the ceasefire in early October suggest that Hamas seems likely to hang tough. It has denounced continuing attacks by the IDF, which Israel states are in response to Hamas' own violations of the ceasefire, but Hamas has not attempted any major retaliation in response. Its capabilities to do so are clearly limited but, as we shall see, it could look for ways to escalate the conflict laterally.

Hamas has attacked rival armed groups, including Israeli-backed militias and criminal clans, and executed suspected collaborators primarily for self-protection, as a warning to others, and to suppress internal challenges. Spilling blood also provided opportunities for performative violence to bolster the morale of its own fighters, to show that it has not surrendered, and to demonstrate that it remains in charge and will not disarm, demobilize, depart, be displaced by the ISF, or be sidelined in negotiations.

The bellicose public posturing and demonstrations of power and determination have the additional benefit of affecting the calculations of potential contributors to the ISF. Reportedly, it has caused them to seek assurances that they are not coming to Gaza to engage in combat or conduct military operations that Israel failed to complete.[55] Muslim countries contemplating sending troops to Gaza must worry about domestic reactions. Top Pakistani clerics, representing all Islamic schools of thought, have warned the government against sending troops to Gaza to disarm Hamas.[56]

These displays of defiance underscore what must already be assumed: Hamas can at any time bring about the collapse of the peace plan, although doing so would have serious consequences for Hamas as well.

Avoiding the Resumption of Full-Scale Hostilities with Israel

Neither side in the conflict has made a conciliatory gesture—nor likely believes that the current cessation of hostilities will last. A recent poll indicates that most Israelis anticipate fighting will resume in the coming year,[57] a view that many in Gaza probably share. Both Israel and Hamas face pressure from their own hardliners. Neither side, however, wants to be seen as the party responsible for a breakdown in the negotiations, which have hardly begun.

The ceasefire is precarious, with each side accusing the other of violations. Few Israelis have been killed in the attacks that have occurred since the ceasefire began. However, in response to the attacks and to preempt potential attacks, the IDF has almost continuously carried out bombing and artillery attacks as well as ground operations, reportedly killing several hundred Palestinians and destroying hundreds of structures.

These attacks may be intended to deter Hamas from new attacks while depriving it of any respite that allows recovery. But Hamas may interpret Israeli actions as efforts to provoke it into an escalating exchange that gives Israel a reason to resume full-scale hostilities. A confrontational strategy does not mean deliberately provoking a renewed war. Hamas wants to keep the heat on in Gaza, not boil the water—Israel must be portrayed as the bomb thrower.

Hamas has more to lose in the resumption of all-out war. It has had little more than three months to replace its losses, train new recruits, restore its command structure, prepare new defenses, and agree upon strategy and operational concepts. If Israel resumes full-scale military operations—possibly with tacit approval from Washington—it will be a fight to the finish in which Israel can be expected to use maximum force to destroy Hamas before domestic divisions or international pressure on Israel impose another ceasefire. And this time, there will be no living Israeli hostages to constrain Israeli operations. (As of this writing, the remains of one hostage have yet to be returned.)

Hamas knows it cannot defeat the IDF on the battlefield, and it cannot depend on support from Hezbollah, the Houthis, or Iran—an alliance that proved disappointing during the war. The current widespread anti-government protests in Iran add further uncertainty. Hamas could only try to protract the fighting and attempt to inflict heavy casualties on the attacking forces, hoping it will sap Israeli morale and mobilize domestic opposition to the war, but heavy Israeli casualties could also have exactly the opposite effect and unify Israel's population.

Given these considerations, Hamas—even while pursuing a confrontational strategy—seems likely to avoid the resumption of full-scale warfare with Israel.

Can Hamas Co-opt the ISF?

How Hamas deals with the ISF requires a different strategy. Both Israel and the United States expect the ISF to disarm Hamas. The U.N. resolution creating the ISF authorizes it "to use all necessary measures to carry its mandate … to stabilize the security environment in Gaza by ensuring the process of demilitarizing the

Gaza Strip, including the destruction and prevention of rebuilding of the military, terror, and offensive infrastructure, as well as the permanent decommissioning of weapons from non-state armed groups."[58] However, U.S. officials, speaking more recently on condition of anonymity, have said that potential contributors to the ISF have said that the ISF "would *not* fight Hamas."[59]

In numerous public statements, Hamas has made it clear that it will resist any attempt by the ISF to disarm it,[60] but Hamas may also calculate that the deployment of an international force in Gaza and beginning of reconstruction and development projects would complicate Israeli military operations. While it may not prevent Israel from conducting small-scale commando raids or precision attacks targeting Hamas commanders, Hamas may figure that Israel will want to avoid large-scale military operations that imperil foreign ISF soldiers, anger their governments, and especially anger the United States.

Hamas may therefore try to craft a creative compromise that gives up some weapons and perhaps a pledge not to carry out attacks, but that puts aside the idea of immediate outright disarmament. In return, Hamas can offer to assist the ISF in policing Gaza. This is something a local force can do better than foreign troops.

Since taking over the territory in 2007, Hamas maintained a civilian police force in Gaza separate from its military units (although some of the police may also have been Hamas fighters.) The police force numbered 9,000 before the war;[61] its numbers now are uncertain. They directed traffic, dealt with routine crime, and protected food distribution against looters, but some of the force acted as political enforcers. Targeted by Israeli forces, the police took cover during the conflict, reemerging during the ceasefires in January 2024,[62] again in early 2025,[63] and yet again after the October 2025 ceasefire.[64]

The peace plan calls for the eventual deployment of a new vetted Palestinian police force. A cooperative arrangement between Hamas and the ISF would keep the peace in the interim. Eventually, Hamas police officers could turn in their weapons, take an oath to the new authority, and become part of the new Palestinian security forces.

Theoretically, it is a compromise that offers peaceful coexistence leading to active cooperation and ultimately reintegration. In reality, it is diplomatic fudge that accepts ambiguity and risk. It moves Hamas from being treated as the defeated party to the category of participant in a process. That may be objectionable to Israel and the United States, but some sort of a tacit deal may be necessary to persuade potential contributors to join the ISF. Resolving this issue would also maintain momentum toward reconstruction and economic development that may contribute to conflict resolution, which is the genius of the peace plan.

However, the configuration of any such compromise and whether it will be accepted by all parties is not the point. The takeaway here is that Hamas can do more than kill; it can also manipulate threat perceptions in order to favorably shape diplomatic outcomes.

Escalation Cannot Be Ruled Out

Israel's intelligence services and political leadership misread the threat posed by Hamas and were caught off guard by its October 7, 2023, attack. The consensus view was that Hamas had been effectively deterred, but deterrence does not necessarily apply to terrorist groups.[65] Fanaticism increases terrorist willingness to accept extreme consequences, and in some cases, the intended effect of a terrorist attack may be to provoke overreaction.

"Terrorist strategic planning may be determined by factors other than conventional military calculations or sensitivity to the prospect of catastrophic losses that would deter most political leaders."

Sinwar's strategic miscalculations in planning the October 7 attack may in part reflect the fact that he perceived the operation as part of a divine plan,[66] a characteristic of terrorists inspired by religious beliefs. The plan depended on too many contingencies beyond Hamas' control. As it turned out, holding hostages did not constrain Israel's response. Hezbollah did not launch its vastly superior missiles in support of Hamas. Iran did not join in. And Israeli Arabs did not rise up. Were the practical uncertainties replaced by Sinwar's mystical conviction that he was acting in accord with a divine plan?

The attack resulted in a massive Israeli counteroffensive in which tens of thousands of Palestinians died. Sinwar still may have calculated that as a political plus. Hopefully, we will learn more about the planning of the attack.

The takeaway here is that terrorist strategic planning may be determined by factors other than conventional military calculations or sensitivity to the prospect of catastrophic losses that would deter most political leaders.

Still, it would seem that from Hamas' perspective, the renewal of full-scale hostilities with Israel is a risky course, while preventing disarmament may be best achieved through diplomacy. Changing circumstances, however, could alter the group's strategic calculations. What might these circumstances be?

Israel might decide to escalate—a situation in which Israel decides that, if the ISF is not going to disarm Hamas, it must do so itself. This is a factor that could renew the war. This parallels Israel's thinking regarding the ability and willingness of Lebanon's government to disarm Hezbollah. Israel's post-ceasefire actions in Lebanon are no doubt being watched in Gaza.

A campaign of targeted killings by Israel could provoke a response. On December 13, 2025, Israel killed a senior Hamas leader in Gaza.[67] This is the first known targeted killing of a high-ranking Hamas official since the latest ceasefire began. Israel claims the killing is justified given the role played by the individual in preparing the October 7 attack. However, Hamas may fear that this is only the first of a continuing campaign of assassinations like the one carried out by Israel during the Second Intifada, which killed most of Hamas' original leaders.[68]

Or Hamas might feel forced to escalate if it saw itself being eclipsed, possibly by other more radical groups determined to continue the armed struggle in Gaza. Or attacks on Israel by other groups in Gaza could provoke Israeli retaliation aimed at Hamas.

The West Bank Battle

A ceasefire in Gaza does not mean the confrontation ends everywhere else. Continued clashes in the West Bank between

October 2023 and October 2025 accounted for approximately 1,000 Palestinian fatalities and scores of Israeli deaths.[69] The simmering conflict could escalate further at any time into an armed conflict in which inaction by Hamas could be seen as an abandonment of the resistance.

Palestinians in the West Bank, as do a vast majority of Palestinians generally, view the Palestinian Authority as ineffectual and corrupt,[70] and have mostly applauded Hamas' militancy. Its attack on October 7 and the subsequent war saw significant gains in its public support.[71] Hamas consistently polls ahead of its rival Fatah. The West Bank is a critical political battleground for Hamas. Despite its popularity, many Palestinians view the West Bank as the main arena of the conflict—the future Palestinian state. What happens in Gaza itself is a sideshow.

Hamas does not have the same military capability in the West Bank that it has in Gaza, but the growing volume of violence has facilitated Hamas recruiting, and it does have clandestine cells, some of which have recently been active. It is particularly strong in Jenin and Nablus where much of the recent violence and most of the clashes between the IDF and Palestinians have occurred. Hebron is another traditional Hamas stronghold.

Escalating assaults on Palestinians and continued expansion of Israeli settlements are putting pressure on all Palestinian groups to respond. Palestinian rivalries will draw Hamas into the battle. It wants to demolish Fatah. It also fears that inaction could be seen as betrayal of its Covenant, even complicity. And if Hamas leaders do not react, Hamas fighters in the West Bank could take action themselves or join other groups more inclined to violence.

This is the fundamental difference between national armies and more difficult to control groups like Hamas where fervent fighters may initiate hostilities on their own initiative, and their allegiance is not limited to one group. All leaders of military formations seek to impose discipline, but Hamas' calculations are complicated.

There is at present no serious rival contender to Hamas in Gaza, however, that is because Hamas has remained combative and committed to its stated objectives. Abandoning those objectives and inaction by Hamas, however, could change the dynamics of the situation. Hamas could be weakened by desertions as its own fighters drift away or join more militant organizations. It also can sour public attitudes toward Hamas. This is precisely the argument made by Hamas leader Khalil Al-Hayya who has warned that public sentiment in Gaza against Hamas is increasing as it becomes clear that the movement's pledge to liberate Palestine and expel the Israelis has devolved into a bid for a seat at the post-war Gaza negotiating table.[72]

To maintain command and prevent organizational splintering, Hamas must maintain the loyalty and compliance of its fighters and its vanguard position in the resistance. To prevent being outflanked by rival groups and face retaliation for their actions, Hamas must be prepared to punish its own allies. In Gaza, guns are the currency of discourse. Leadership, legitimacy, loyalty, influence, security, and survival are maintained by the ruthless use of force.

If put under extreme pressure, Hamas has some capability to carry out terrorist attacks in Israel. Hamas could instigate a new intifada. Or Hamas could maintain tranquility while it prepares another devastating attack. With the IDF occupying half of Gaza, this is not likely to take the form of a cross-border assault, but could take the form of something like the 2008 Mumbai attack, in which a team of attackers infiltrated the city and split up to carry out coordinated attacks.

International attacks on Israeli or Jewish targets, something Hamas has not generally done, are also possible. European authorities have uncovered Hamas involvement in a number of recent terrorist plots. In his article in the October 2025 issue of *CTC Sentinel* on whether Hamas will pursue external operations, Matthew Levitt makes a convincing case that under the direction of its central leadership, the organization has been expanding its capabilities for international terrorism for a number of years. Although a departure from its previous *modus operandi*, it is certainly a strategic option. But Levitt also notes that Hamas may rein in its external operations "so as not to undermine the ceasefire and give Israel reason to resume its war against Hamas."[73] A terrorist campaign against Israeli targets abroad would entail risks for Hamas. In addition to provoking renewed war with Israel, terrorist attacks could unify Israelis. They could also undermine global pro-Palestinian sympathies and replace foreign efforts to constrain Israelis with security-driven crackdowns.

However, if Israel launches an all-out attack on Hamas in Gaza, then all options are on the table, including terrorist attacks in Israel and abroad. Hamas denied involvement in the German plot, not surprisingly. There is, however, the possibility that actors abroad, unconnected with Hamas but inspired by events in Gaza, could carry out attacks on their own initiative to demonstrate their solidarity with Hamas or seek support from Iran or others. Levitt points out that Hamas-inspired factions, rogue actors, or independent cells could work with allies like Iran to carry out attacks.[74] Operating under a different banner would allow Hamas leaders to maintain plausible deniability. The emergence of a hardline faction in Hamas that carries out international terrorist attacks under a new name, but with tacit support of Hamas leaders would parallel the emergence of Black September from Fatah in the 1970s. Although operating under the new banner, the PLO planned and supported its operations.[75] There are ample precedents in the Middle East for all of these permutations.

If Hamas concludes that the only purpose of the peace plan is to eradicate the group as a means of reducing pressure on Israel to acquiesce to eventual Palestinian statehood, then compliance is extinction. Hamas does not intend to disappear. The alternative is escalation that could immediately collapse the peace plan or a protracted campaign of subversion and clandestine armed resistance.

Finally, escalation may result from miscalculation. Precisely calibrating violence is difficult. It is hard to predict whether the opponent will correctly perceive intended constraint—or whether that even matters. Both Israel and Hamas face pressure from their own hardliners who may be looking for excuses to escalate. Hamas miscalculated on October 7; it can do so again.

Part Four: Returning to its Origins

Hamas is determined to remain a central part of Palestinian political life. The peace plan says, no way: "Hamas and other factions agree to not have any role in the governance of Gaza, directly, indirectly, or in any form."[76] That would seem to make voluntary disarmament and demobilization an unlikely course of action. It would require a dramatic turnabout in Hamas' strategy. However unlikely, it cannot be entirely dismissed. We have witnessed dramatic turnabouts before.

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1977 astounded the world

when he told the Egyptian parliament, "I am ready to go to the ends of the earth, and even to their home, to the Knesset itself, to argue with them [the Israelis], in order to prevent one Egyptian soldier from being wounded."[77] Recall Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's famous remark on the lawn of the White House when signing the first Oslo Accords in 1993: "Enough of blood and tears."[78] Cynics, of course, will point out that both men were assassinated by fanatics in their own camp.

These historical examples, of course, differ from Hamas' current circumstances, but Hamas has shown itself at times capable of pragmatism. The former head of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, repeatedly proposed a 10-year ceasefire with Israel—with 10-year extensions if necessary. It was a conditional offer, which many dismissed as a propaganda ploy, and Yassin was assassinated soon after, but it still gives cover for Hamas to alter its course and accept new realities.

Some Hamas leaders reportedly "favor political accommodation over open-ended confrontation."[79] In a clear step toward acceptance of the peace plan, on January 11, 2026, Hamas announced that its Gaza agencies will "hand over all authorities in Gaza to the independent Palestinian technocratic government," that will control Gaza under the supervision of the Board of Peace called for in the peace plan.[80]

Announcing that it is ready to cede its political control of Gaza does not mean that Hamas is ready to give up its weapons, but imagine for a moment that someone with authority in Gaza like Hamas' current military commander, Izz al-Din Haddad—a hypothetical choice, not an endorsement—were to announce that after decades of fighting, it was time to put the guns down. *'Tens of thousands of Palestinians—soldiers and civilians—have lost their lives in a succession of bitter wars. We have achieved international recognition of the Palestinians' just cause and, owing to President Trump's personal intervention, Israel has been constrained and there is now 'a credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood,' which is now endorsed by a majority of the European Union states and the United Nations. Hamas will now take that path.'*

In accordance with the peace plan, Hamas in return would expect Israel to further withdraw its forces from Gaza. Hamas could welcome the deployment of the ISF, announcing that it looks forward to working with it to maintain peace in Gaza. Hamas leaders could argue that the peace would allow rapid reconstruction from which all Gazans would materially benefit. The men who defended the people of Gaza would now help rebuild it.

Embracing a peaceful pathway would require a radical change in Hamas' thinking. Hamas would have to counter any perception that suspending the armed struggle was a betrayal of religious faith. Nor was it an abandonment of the struggle, which is why it would be better if the announcement came from a frontline commander like Haddad who had devoted his life to the armed struggle, which had also cost him the life of his son and almost cost his own life on several occasions. It would have to be presented as a continuation of the struggle by other means to achieve what the United States itself now recognized as "the aspiration of the Palestinian people."

A man like Haddad could say this with credibility. He joined Hamas as a teenager in 1987, the year it was created. He has been imprisoned by Israel several times. He had a price on his head and was reportedly the target of six Israeli assassination attempts. Israelis referred to him as "the ghost." While commanders who have fought on the frontlines have a greater voice among militants, it does not mean there would be no opposition to him from determined diehards in Hamas or that all would promptly comply. Internal warfare might well follow. Ending wars can be bloody.

To take advantage of the new circumstances, Hamas could create a broader political movement, possibly named something other than Hamas, but reflecting its Islamic principles and continuing commitment to Palestinian statehood while enabling Hamas' veterans to participate with the recognition that the new movement will argue they deserve as heroes of the longest and—for Palestinians—bloodiest war fought against Israel.

A Hamas Role in Policing and Politics

In return for facilitating the advance of the peace plan, Hamas would continue to argue for a post-war role in policing and politics. Hamas and most Palestinians have long been suspicious of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF), created after the 1993 Oslo Accords, which it views not only as an instrument of its rival Fatah, but also as collaborators with Israel in the West Bank. The European Union currently trains the Palestinian Civil Police Force in the West Bank, a separate component of the PASF, but leaves the other missions of the American-backed PASF. The European Union has expressed its willingness to train a civil police force for Gaza.[81] Hamas currently runs the police force in Gaza.

In return for suspending its armed struggle, Hamas could demand that its new political entity participate in reforming the Palestinian Authority from within—as called for in the peace plan. It could point out that political recognition and participation differ little from the settlements that ended the conflicts in El Salvador, South Africa, and Northern Ireland. Hamas could also renew its call for the release of imprisoned Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti—not an endorsement, but not a hypothetical choice—to enable him to participate in (and possibly lead) a unified Palestinian government.

Acceding to the peace plan would require Hamas to reverse that trajectory and revert to a social and political movement. The Muslim Brotherhood, from which Hamas emerged, began as an Islamist revivalist movement aiming to create an Islamic society through social, political, and religious activism. In the mid-1940s, the Brotherhood established a branch in Palestine where it focused on building mosques and schools, improving health care, and providing other social services.

In the turbulent years that followed, Hamas increasingly incorporated a more Palestinian nationalist outlook and adopted a more activist strategy. In 1987, it rebranded itself as a resistance movement and participated in the violence of the First Intifada. In the 1990s, it became a rival of the PLO and the principal opponent of the peace process. This ultimately led to the emergence of Hamas as the most violent group of the Second (Al-Aqsa) Intifada, followed by its takeover of Gaza in 2007 and multiple wars with Israel.

Many skeptics outside of Hamas, of course, would dismiss Hamas' change of heart as an example of *taqiyah*, the Muslim concept that permits dissimulation when it serves a purpose. Hamas could respond that *taqiyah* applies to concealing Islamic faith, which Hamas is not doing.

Nor does a change of strategy require a change of heart as Hamas members would be embracing, not abandoning the path to eventual Palestinian statehood, which the peace plan itself promises. This option essentially takes the movement back to its Hamas Muslim Brotherhood origins as a faith-based social welfare and political

movement as it existed before Sheikh Yassin transformed it into what Ranstorp called a "war machine."[82]

The Muslim Brotherhood has a long and complex history, which we tend to see almost exclusively through its recent armed struggle with Israel. Its emergence reflects issues that have engaged Muslim thinkers for the past 150 years, and it has evolved as an Islamic resistance movement since its founding in the 1920s.[83] In Israel, its trajectory has taken it to the attack on October 7, 2023, but that does not mean that survival cannot dictate new directions. Indeed, an internal debate seems to be occurring now.

Part Five: A Flexible and Opportunistic Strategy

There is a third way. It is not merely a compromise between confrontation and compliance, but rather it is a strategy driven by uncertainty as to what might happen next and disunity among Hamas' leadership. Growing political turbulence in Israel, escalating violence in the West Bank that could lead to a renewed intifada, an Israeli invasion of Lebanon to prevent Hezbollah from rearming, and/or U.S. abandonment of its peace plan or its renunciation of an eventual Palestinian state are all possibilities.

The strategy is therefore flexible and opportunistic. Hamas can again thank President Trump for his personal intervention in arranging the ceasefire and embrace the ambitious economic development plan, which will benefit the people of Gaza who have been deprived of work and income for so many years and suffered so grievously during the repeated wars in Gaza, especially the most recent one.

Hamas can restate its position that it looks forward to a defined (including time delineated) path to statehood as part of an eventual two-state solution (although it is not certain that Hamas would accept that as a final outcome). In the meantime, it pledges not to attack neighboring Israeli communities, not to launch rockets or missiles, and to work with the ISF to prevent rocket attacks by other factions. In return, Hamas will rely on the United States and the yet-to-be-formed International Board, envisioned in the peace plan, to persuade Israel to withdraw from the remainder of Gaza and prevent any Israeli settlements in Gaza.

This approach offers backers of the peace plan compliance, but without a capitulation that would enfeeble Hamas. It is unyielding on core survival issues, but it accepts the utility of a long-term ceasefire and will avoid provoking the resumption of full-scale Israeli operations. It therefore will avoid reacting to minor Israeli provocations, relying instead on international, and specifically American, pressure on Israel to prevent escalation.

Seeking a Cooperative Relationship with the ISF

Cooperation will require some concessions. Hamas does not want to see Gaza descend into the kind of chaos seen in Iraq in 2003 or Syria in 2011. Therefore, there is a pathway where Hamas can decide to welcome the deployment of the ISF, pointing out that its presence, not just in the Israeli-occupied portion of Gaza, but eventually throughout the territory will protect the people of Gaza (primarily because it complicates aggressive actions by the Israelis).

As discussed previously, to encourage its deployment, Hamas can quietly communicate to prospective contributors to the force in advance that it does not intend to challenge their presence and, in fact, can assist them by operating as a parallel force. This arrangement does not require formal recognition, but merely a tacit *modus vivendi*. The two forces will coexist and avoid confrontation. (There will be elements on both sides that will want to spoil this.) An informal joint communications mechanism can be established to ensure deconfliction and coordination when needed. The ISF will thus be able to fulfill its mission as a stabilizing force while Hamas rules the streets and back alleys.

Aware that the ISF will be reluctant to be seen shooting Palestinians or be perceived as Israel's proxies, Hamas will further assist the ISF in implementing the peace plan by turning over its rockets and some of its other heavier weapons, but its fighters would retain their personal weapons, which Hamas can argue are necessary for protection and to deal with groups that prey upon the population or might seek to overturn the ceasefire. Hamas can pledge that except for the firepower necessary to deal with heavily armed gangs, the bulk of Hamas' weapons could be placed in locations possibly under some kind of joint ISF-Hamas custody.

Hamas could also demand that its current police officers as well as fighters who turn over their weapons and pledge themselves to peaceful co-existence are not just amnestied as the plan promises, but that they are allowed to participate in the expanded Gaza police force so that these individuals can receive police training provided by the European Union or in one of the Arab countries that may offer such training.

IDF operations degraded Hamas' military capabilities, preventing it from conducting any more large-scale attacks like that on October 7 and forcing it to operate exclusively as urban guerrillas. Rearming for large-scale operations at this time makes little military sense; parades to show off uniformed fighters are currently counterproductive. Instead, Hamas could use the time to review its performance and formulate a new doctrine of defensive and offensive urban guerrilla warfare.

Attacking well-dug-in defenders in urban environments is costly in terms of casualties. Israel relied heavily on airpower and kept Israeli casualties down below the high rates of ground casualties suffered by the Syrian Democratic Forces in taking cities held by the Islamic State. The IDF did not suffer heavy casualties in any single battle equivalent to those suffered by U.S. forces, for example, in the Second Battle of Fallujah in Iraq or the 1968 Battle of Hue in Vietnam. The costliest battle of the war to the IDF was Hamas' initial attack on October 7. As Gaza reconstructs and builds new infrastructure and commercial facilities under international supervision, including hotels to promote economic development, Israel's use of air power will be constrained. Hamas theoretically could rely less on heavier weapons and more on small-scale operations assisted by drones. This would require discreet retraining, rather than ostentatious displays of masked marching fighters, which may be popular with many Gazans as symbols of armed resistance, but only attract negative attention, and certainly would diminish the attractiveness of Gaza for investment or high-end tourism.

Hamas can use its popularity as the avatar of Palestinian resistance to build a broad political movement, both domestically and internationally. Historically, Hamas has always been more multidimensional than a purely military movement. It has political skills, has run the government of Gaza since 2007, and delivered social services. It is difficult to determine how well it has performed these tasks. It has ruled with an iron hand, and there are no reliable public opinion polls or elections to gauge performance. Hamas fighters are often cheered in public and there are choreographed displays of support, but there are also reports of complaints.

Conclusion

Looking at the situation from Hamas' point of view gives us insight into how many variables it must include in its decision-making. These are just as complex but certainly differ from decision-making in open democracies. No one knows what Hamas will do next. Its leaders themselves, inside and outside Gaza, may be uncertain. Internal divisions have been reported in the past, and there are differing views today.

That suggests uncertainty about Hamas' future trajectory. Pragmatists led by Khaled Mashal argue for political accommodation while hardliners led by Khalil al-Hayya demand continued confrontation. The two men are the major contenders to lead Hamas' politburo in forthcoming internal Hamas elections.[84] As of January 2026, al-Hayya was seen as the front-runner,[85] but he is close to the Iranians[86] and therefore could be affected by Iran's current political unrest, which could also reduce Hamas' ability to pay its fighters. On January 12, 2026, it was reported that the election had been postponed, possibly because of internal disagreements within Hamas.[87]

The cessation of hostilities does not mean an end to hostility. There is no commitment to peace. Reconciliation is a far-off planet. Hamas is primarily concerned with survival.

This has been a multi-front war for Israel. Going forward, the same is true for Hamas, which faces a complex array of threats. Israel is its most dangerous, but not its only adversary. Gaza remains a rough, heavily armed neighborhood where Hamas must deal with near enemies, including rival armed groups, criminal gangs, and private parties seeking vengeance.

Beyond Gaza, Hamas is determined to crush its principal rival for leadership of all Palestinians—Fatah. The venue for that contest is the West Bank.

Hamas sees the peace plan as filled with risks but potentially offering opportunities. The current uncertainty requires flexibility. Hamas will keep its options open until a more complete picture emerges.

Since its creation, Hamas has transformed from a religious, social, and political movement into a violent resistance front to a proto-state with a large, well-armed paramilitary force. It has gone through two intifadas and multiple wars with Israel. During that time, it has evolved organizationally, adapted to new conditions, and adjusted its strategy. That process continues.

Its transition from terrorist cells to its Al-Qassam Brigades enabled Hamas to escalate its violence and shift its strategy toward more ambitious military operations like that on October 7. However, the primary objectives of that attack remained in the conceptual realm of terrorism. Hamas did not expect to overrun Israel militarily. Written instructions to the attackers confirm that the attack was intended to exploit what Hamas perceived as weaknesses in Israel's fractured political body, to shock and demoralize its foe, to create fear and alarm, and, by taking Israel down psychologically, inspire Hamas' allies to join in the kill. It was a classic terrorist operation. This manner of thinking will continue to strongly influence future Hamas strategy and tactics.

It should be pointed out, however, that Sinwar possibly had ambitions greater than a terrorist attack aimed primarily at achieving psychological effects. Some intelligence suggests that Hamas' plans aimed at actually seizing and defending positions in southern Israel, which might have been more feasible if Hezbollah simultaneously launched complementary operations in the north.[88]

"Three existential issues will dominate whatever strategic course Hamas may take. Hamas will not be fully disarmed. Hamas will not be excluded from playing a significant role in the future of Gaza and the broader Palestinian movement. Hamas will not give up its commitment to eventual Palestinian statehood. Whether its strength declines with a two-state solution or persists until all territory of historical Palestine is held depends on at present unknowable factors."

The music festival, where so much carnage occurred, possibly disrupted this operational concept, by diverting a number of attackers toward pursuing civilians attending the festival rather than advancing farther inland. The stubborn defense put up by Israeli civilians as well as by personnel from the IDF, Shin Bet, and police further contributed to delaying, disrupting, and limiting the scope of the attacks.

Internal documents from past pivot points tell us that Hamas thinks strategically. It identifies its long-term objectives, its basic principles, its red lines, and its strategic options. Hamas examines all scenarios. Amid the continuous hostilities, miscalculations can have dire consequences.

In the current situation, Hamas must now also take into account an unprecedented array of external actors, each with its own direct interests in the outcome. It is apparent from its own review of the recent conflict and previous documents cited in this article that Hamas follows Israeli political developments, appreciates the domestic political pressures that govern Israel's actions, and pays close attention to U.S. relations with Israel.

Three existential issues will dominate whatever strategic course Hamas may take. Hamas will not be fully disarmed. Hamas will not be excluded from playing a significant role in the future of Gaza and the broader Palestinian movement. Hamas will not give up its commitment to eventual Palestinian statehood. Whether its strength declines with a two-state solution or persists until all territory of historical Palestine is held depends on at present unknowable factors.

Hamas does not view itself as a vanquished party.[89] Hamas knows that it can be decimated militarily, but it does not intend to disappear. A return to all-out war poses serious risks, which Hamas will likely want to avoid. However, the resumption of full-scale hostilities will also destroy the peace plan, which gives Hamas leverage. If it is not part of the game, it can knock over the table. In short, Hamas can make—or break—the peace plan.

Hamas' network of alliances proved to be a mirage. Hezbollah, Iran, and its proxies failed to provide more than minimal assistance and cannot be relied upon in future strategic calculations. Hamas, however, still wants Iranian financial support and may seek

advanced weaponry, although smuggling missiles into Gaza should be more difficult than Iran's deliveries to Hezbollah.

Hamas probably sees gains in world opinion—greater sympathy for the Palestinian cause, increased opposition to Israel—as diplomatic capital it does not want to squander. It wants to keep Gaza and the Palestinian cause in the headlines in a favorable light.

Under current circumstances, terrorist attacks in Israel bring substantial risk and may backfire. International terrorism has utility as a threat, but attacks could be counterproductive. However, neither can be ruled out.

Growing violence in the West Bank creates recruiting opportunities for Hamas and could lead to a new front in which Hamas is already an active participant.

Hamas will not likely be disarmed without a fight but, in return for political concessions, it may be persuaded to give up its rockets, which have little strategic utility, and possibly some of its other heavy weapons. Hamas may be receptive to a creative solution that allows some of its fighters to lay down—not turn over—the basic weapons of its fighters in return for credible guarantees, but that will require difficult negotiations and possibly some compromise.

Hamas is aware that the ISF must be comprised primarily of troops from Muslim countries and that their governments do not want to be engulfed in hostilities and cannot be seen as Israel's proxies in disarming. Therefore, these governments may welcome compromise solutions.

Hamas is capable of multi-dimensional warfare; it can manipulate threat perceptions in order to favorably shape diplomatic outcomes. As an example, Hamas' belligerent refusal to disarm is in part a psychological operations campaign calculated to discourage potential participants in the ISF to deploy to Gaza without an acceptable compromise, tacit or announced, that is agreed to in advance.

Looking at Hamas from its own perspective provides insights into what its leaders worry about, not what its fighters feel or the attitudes of Gazans toward Hamas. Determined not to disappear, to demonstrate its readiness to resist disarmament, and to ensure its control of Gaza, belligerence is necessary for survival. Hamas faces an array of military, political, and diplomatic challenges. Its leaders debate what course of action to take to hold onto its constituency. A peaceful path is an option—but peace is not the objective. CTC

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