

Israel-Hamas war

What is left of Hamas?



Israel believes it has shattered the group's military force in Gaza but the remnants will be harder to destroy

Mehul Srivastava, Andrew England and Neri Zilber in Tel Aviv 8 HOURS AGO

Ever since Yusuf and his family first fled Gaza City earlier this year, he has been shocked at how much of Hamas appears to be intact.

A secular software engineer who encouraged his wife to leave her hair uncovered, the 43-year-old was no fan of the Islamists, who ruled Gaza for nearly two decades as both a social and religious movement promising freedom from Israeli occupation and a tyrannical militant group tolerating little dissent.

By the time Yusuf fled, Israel's military had already wrested much of Gaza from Hamas's military wing, killing thousands of its fighters, and would soon [assassinate leader Yahya Sinwar](#). Israeli officials now believe they have destroyed much of the group's military force.

But what remains of [Hamas](#), as Yusuf's odyssey through displaced people's camps in Rafah and Deir al-Balah shows, will prove much harder to destroy. They are "trying to rule the ruins", Yusuf, who asked for anonymity, said in a phone interview from the tent where he now lives with his wife, two children and an elderly aunt. "Everywhere there is the smell of Hamas."

When he needed blankets and space in one camp, he was told to speak to an employee at the Ministry of Social Development whom he recognised as a local Hamas leader from northern Gaza. In the evenings, the imams — nearly all appointed in consultation with Hamas — would try to take the men to the ruins of nearby mosques to pray.





A boy walks past tents in the yard of a school that was hit by Israeli bombs in the central Gaza Strip © Eyad Baba/AFP/Getty Images



People attend Friday prayers in the damaged 13th-century Great Omari Mosque in the old town of Gaza City © Omar al-Qattaa/AFP/Getty Images

And when there was a spate of robberies of jewellery, mobile phones and cash in another shelter, the complaints went to a local, plain-clothes policeman from Khan Younis, a city once considered a Hamas stronghold.

Within a day or two, video clips circulated on a Hamas-affiliated Telegram channel of the alleged thieves being beaten, evidence of how remnants of the Hamas-run ministry of interior are trying to keep up a semblance of law and order. The policeman returned with a bag of phones.

“They’re not going anywhere,” Yusuf, who has even told his wife to start covering her hair and pretended to pray, said of local Hamas officials. “They’re here, waiting for the war to stop.”

Israeli officials say its offensive has destroyed 80 of the group's 94 battalions

ISRAELI OFFICIALS SAY ITS OFFENSIVE HAS DESTROYED 23 OF THE GROUP'S 24 BATTALIONS, reducing it from a militarily structured group that could fire thousands of rockets all the way to Tel Aviv to small, guerrilla-style cells. They appear to operate independently and try to regroup in surprising ways, including most recently in the Jabalia refugee camp in northern Gaza.

Israel has renewed its military campaign in north Gaza where the IDF says Hamas is regrouping

Israeli strikes reported in 24 hours to 16:30 GMT November 1

- Humanitarian area
- Israeli ground operation
- Reported missile strikes
- Refugee camp
- Refugee camp area





Last updated: Nov 1 16:30 GMT. Sources: FT research, UALive, Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project, Gisha, OpenStreetMap
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But Hamas, a Muslim Brotherhood-inspired political movement, has always been more than just a fearsome paramilitary force, and is part of the Palestinian social fabric that has formally and informally run a varied clutch of ministries and social services.

What remains now is a severely weakened but still resilient rump of that state. After ejecting its Palestinian rival Fatah from Gaza in a bloody 2007 coup, many of the jobs in the ministries involved in providing social services went to people with political — not military — ties to Hamas, allowing the group to become deeply enmeshed in governance.

Today, despite the fact that their offices have been bombed and their staff scattered, those that survive run a depleted, ineffective but still discernible form of government while the shattered military arm transforms into a guerrilla movement.

Israel has eliminated Hamas's top leaders

Yahya Sinwar
HAMAS POLITICAL LEADER —
HEAD

Ismail Haniyeh
FORMER HAMAS POLITICAL
LEADER — HEAD

Mohammed Deif
COMMANDER OF HA
MILITARY WING — HEAD

DEAD

Sinwar was one of the masterminds behind Hamas's October 7 attack and was Israel's most wanted man. The IDF has said Sinwar was killed in southern Gaza on October 16.

LEADER — DEAD

Haniyeh was killed in a strike on a building in Tehran on July 31. Iranian officials have blamed Israel for the assassination, which is likely to complicate US-led efforts to broker a hostage release deal.

MILITARY WING — D

Israel said on August 16 it killed Deif, known as "the Commander" in a July air strike in Gaza. Israel has not confirmed his identity as commander of the Al-Qassam Brigades, Israel's military wing. He is believed to be one of the masterminds behind the deadly October 7 attack.



And they wait. In interviews, Gazans such as Yusuf, Israeli military officials and analysts described what is left of Hamas as a significantly potent player in the ruins of Gaza, poised to bounce back as soon as Israel withdraws.

“They are a movement, they have institutions — it will take them time to recover, but they will not be deleted,” said Omar Shaban, the founder of Pal-Think for Strategic Studies, a Gaza-based think-tank who still has family in the enclave. “Of course, they cannot control the society and deliver services as expected, but they are still there and they are trying to maintain some of their roles in civil life.”

What’s left of Hamas is a crucial question, especially after the killing of Sinwar last month, apparently in a chance encounter with trainee Israeli military officers.

US and regional diplomats hope his killing creates the opportunity for a long-term ceasefire to end the war and free Israeli hostages held in Gaza. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has rejected the terms, however, arguing that it would in effect leave what remains of Hamas in charge of what remains of Gaza.





A displaced Palestinian man walks past rubble in Deir al-Balah carrying bags of bread © Ramadan Abed/Reuters

“They have lost their military capability, they have lost their chain of command, but they are still in Gaza, they still have administrative capabilities,” acknowledged an Israeli military official. “Dismantling the military power is more simple than dismantling the administrative capability.

“Sinwar’s loss will help that, but Hamas is stronger than one man,” he added.

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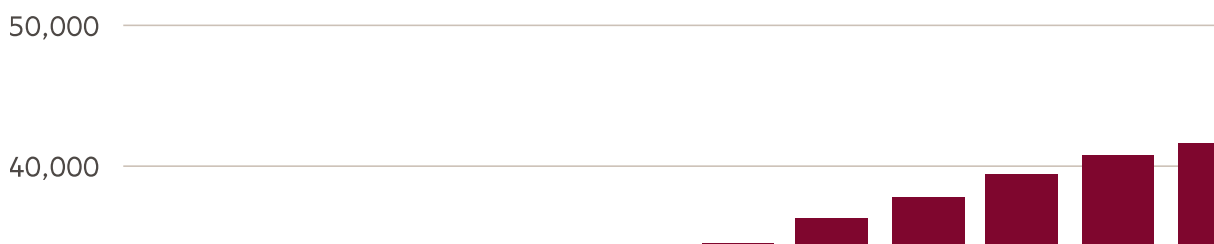
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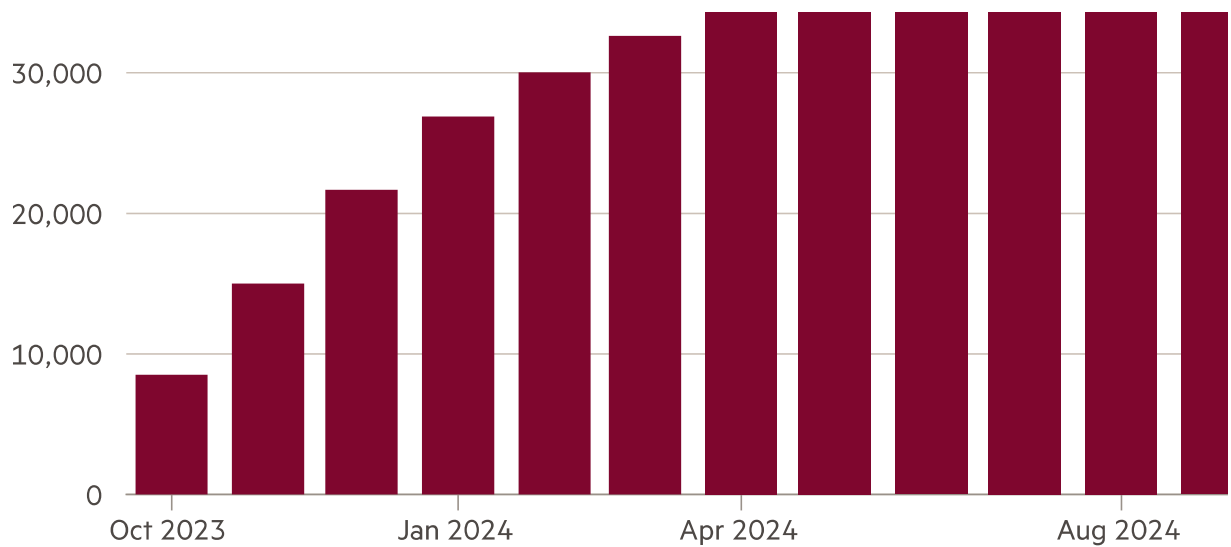
Before the war, Sinwar used to stand astride the Gaza Strip as a near potentate: inspecting uniformed troops during mass drills, meeting with regional diplomats and giving fiery speeches to adoring crowds at outdoor rallies. His successor, yet to be formally anointed, will most likely be marked for assassination by Israel and forced to live in the shadows, further transforming Hamas.

Just over a year after Sinwar’s fateful decision to attack Israel on October 7 2023 and the subsequent ferocious [Israeli offensive on Gaza](#), the territory he once controlled lies in ruins. More than 43,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to local health officials, and nearly the entire population displaced in a lawless, inhospitable wasteland.

The death toll in Gaza has crossed 43,000

Cumulative number of Palestinians killed in Gaza since Oct 7 2023





FINANCIAL TIMES

Source: UN OCHA • Data as of Oct 29 2024

While many Gazans blame Hamas for what they see as a reckless gamble that provoked Israel’s onslaught, the movement — seen as a standard bearer for armed resistance — remains the most popular Palestinian faction by far.

Though support appears to wane as the war drags on, an overwhelming majority of Palestinians believes that the October 7 attack brought them closer to a Palestinian state by returning their suffering to the global stage, Ramallah-based pollster the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research said.

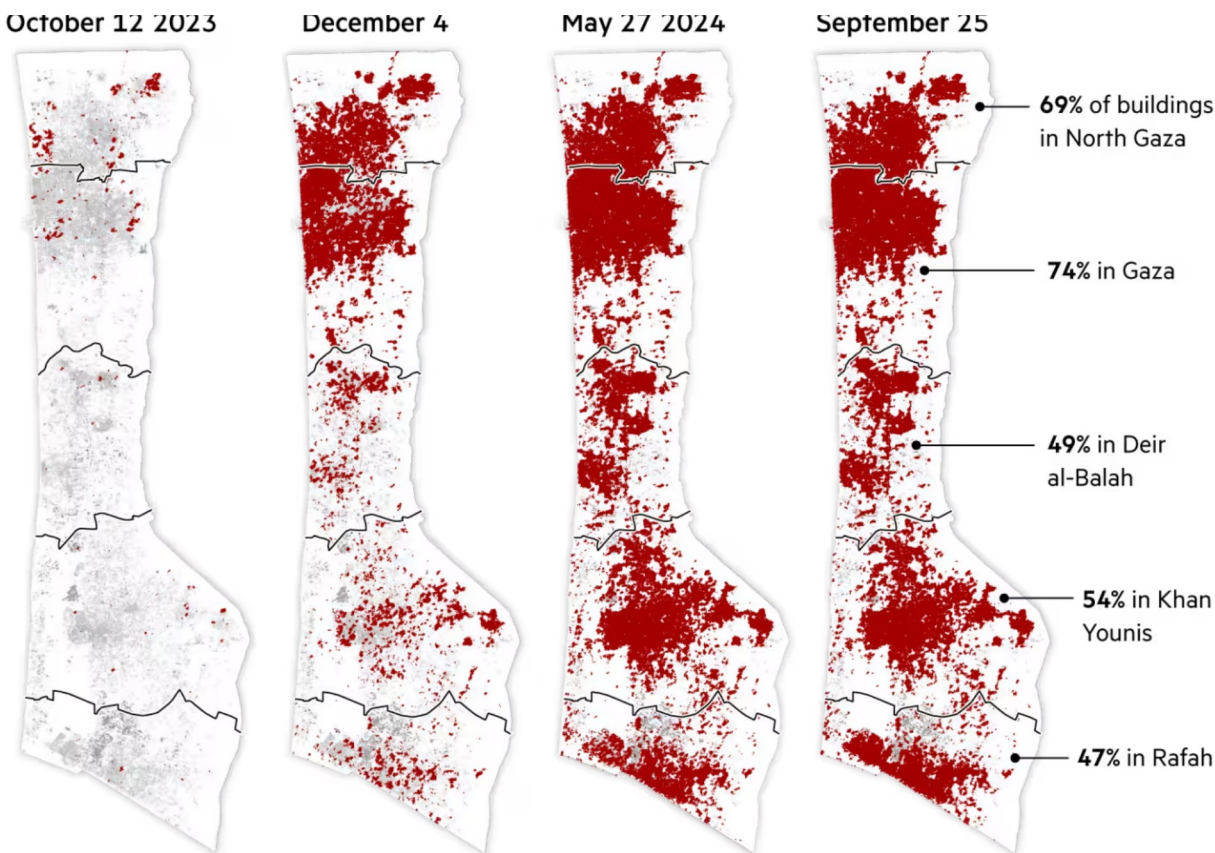
And outside Gaza and the West Bank, Hamas remains largely untouched. Despite the assassination of political leader Ismail Haniyeh during a visit to Tehran earlier this year, the group has offices in Doha, holds press conferences in Beirut and Iran and its envoys travel to world capitals for talks, including to Beijing in July.

“You can damage them but you cannot make them wave a white flag. You can smash their heads, like we did regarding Sinwar, but let’s admit it — in Gaza we are not getting closer to the goal” the government set at the start of the war, said Michael Milshtein, a former Israeli intelligence official and expert on Palestinian affairs at Tel Aviv University.

“Even after they suffered unprecedented damage, they are still the dominant player in Gaza, and they still have basic military capacity.”

Over half of buildings in Gaza may have been damaged

Likely building damage between October 5 and...



Sources: OpenStreetMap; damage analysis of Copernicus Sentinel-1 satellite data by Corey Scher of CUNY Graduate Center and Jamon Van Den Hoek of Oregon State University
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In an interview, a recently injured fighter from Hamas’s Qassam Brigades said the movement had been prepared for just such a moment — disappearing from a battlefield tilted in Israel’s heavily armed military’s favour and re-emerging as a guerrilla force that harasses and kills soldiers from the Israel Defense Forces, slowly sapping Israel’s willpower.

The Financial Times contacted him via a Palestinian journalist he regularly speaks to. “Protecting the homeland can mean many things,” he said, asking to be referred to as Ibrahim al-Turkiye. “Today, it means humiliating the enemy with a thousand deep cuts, chasing him off our sacred Palestine.”

Hamas was already well-equipped for a long-running insurgency, he said, since it depended on light weapons, small amounts of explosive charges and small squads of three to five fighters who worked quickly and melted into the ruins of Gaza. Hamas also holds mountains of cash, even [stealing tens of millions of dollars](#) from Palestinian banks.

Hamas’s ability to fight a rearguard guerrilla action is increasingly apparent: an Israeli colonel was recently killed by a Hamas explosion on the outskirts of Jabalia during the IDF’s fourth offensive into the refugee camp since the war began.

The fighting there was severe and could last several more weeks, a second Israeli military official said. It may even spread to other parts of northern Gaza, he added during a briefing to western journalists this week.

“The [Hamas] machine reproduces. This conflict is not about personalities — they’re important — but about starting a new process that benefits from [Sinwar’s] elimination,” said Ibrahim Dalalsha, head of the Ramallah-based Horizon Center think-tank. “I’m old enough to have seen figures rising and falling over many years, through intifadas and conflict.”

Cartography by Cleve Jones and data visualisation by Aditi Bhandari

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