

## Israel-Hamas war

### Gaza: a war without end?



A growing number of Israeli critics say military objectives have long since been superseded by the far right's political goals

**Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv

Published JUL 23 2025

---

When a Hamas ambush killed five Israeli soldiers and injured 14 others in Gaza this month, the Israeli public was shocked not just because of the toll but also the location.

The northern city of Beit Hanoun, which was on the Israel Defense Forces' initial route of attack when it first invaded [Gaza](#) after Hamas's October 7 2023 assault, currently sits inside an Israeli military "buffer zone" and has been subject to four separate IDF offensives.

That Hamas operatives were able to spring the attack in the city — or what is left of it — has provoked an uncomfortable question for many Israelis: what is the IDF actually achieving in Gaza?

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his supporters are adamant, as they have been since October 7, that only military force will succeed in freeing the 50 remaining hostages still held by Hamas and destroying the militant group.

Yet 21 months later neither of those goals have been fully attained. Most of Gaza lies in ruins, with almost 60,000 Palestinians killed, according to local officials. Allies, including the US, have shown increasing anger towards Israel over [the toll on civilians](#).

To a growing number of domestic critics, the IDF's campaign appears increasingly purposeless, with Israeli troops, hostages and Palestinian civilians being sacrificed for Netanyahu's political goals.

To them, the prime minister's insistence on continuing with the war is political cover to keep together his coalition — whose far-right members have threatened to bring down the [government](#) if he ends the conflict — all while bogging down the military in

. . . . .

an incipient quagmire.

“It’s a war of attrition . . . with no strategic purpose or objective, like walking in a swamp,” said Michael Milshtein, a former IDF intelligence officer.

There has also been an increase in recent Israeli casualties, with 35 soldiers killed in Gaza since June compared with 11 in the three months after Netanyahu broke a shortlived ceasefire in March.

“ Hamas not only still exists but is active. It’s still the dominant force inside the strip. No real alternative has been created, and no hostages have been returned” alive since March, Milshtein said.

Some Israeli critics, including former prime minister Ehud Olmert, have accused Israel of committing war crimes.

Others, including Arabs, Palestinians and many more across the world, fear there is another purpose behind the Israeli offensive: to make the strip uninhabitable and force Gazans out for good.

Opinion polls show an overwhelming majority of Israelis support a deal to secure the freedom of the hostages in Gaza, about 20 of whom are believed to be alive, including if it means ending the war — already the longest in the country's history.

But though talks over a new 60-day ceasefire in the strip are ongoing in Qatar, promises earlier this month of a quick breakthrough proved illusory.

Israel and Hamas are known to be at loggerheads over the extent of the IDF's withdrawal, and the Palestinian militant group is seeking guarantees — which Netanyahu has refused to provide — that the war will end permanently after the temporary truce.



To a growing number of domestic critics, the IDF's campaign appears increasingly purposeless, with Israeli troops, hostages and Palestinian civilians being sacrificed for Benjamin Netanyahu's political goals © Ammar Awad/Reuters

With talks still inconclusive, the IDF this week launched a major ground offensive in the central Gazan city of Deir al-Balah, one of the final remaining pockets of the strip not yet invaded by Israel because of intelligence that hostages were being held there.

Israeli forces, which are now present in about three-quarters of Gaza, are also operating on the outskirts of Gaza City and in the southern city of Khan Younis. Much of the rest of Gaza, including the southern city of Rafah, has been razed to the ground.

“There’s no more Rafah, it doesn’t exist anymore,” said one IDF reservist, recently deployed to southern Gaza. “It’s all rubble . . . Hamas spent 17 years shaping [Gaza] their way. We’ve spent almost two years shaping it our way.”

Israel said last year that it had destroyed more than 20 of Hamas’s 24 territorial battalions and killed more than 20,000 operatives, including nearly all of the group’s top leaders, such as Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif.

But while Hamas has largely been decimated as an organised fighting force, the group has been able to recruit thousands of new young fighters, according to Israeli and US intelligence assessments, and continues to exert effective internal control in areas not held by Israel.

Isolated cells still launch lethal hit-and-run attacks from their remaining tunnels, hide-outs and the surrounding ruins.

Israeli troops say they rarely encounter Hamas fighters on the open battlefield, saying their primary mission is to destroy whatever military infrastructure remains, including the tunnel network, and hold territory.





Smoke rises following an Israeli air strike in the northern Gaza Strip © Abir Sultan/EPA/Shutterstock

The IDF also launches relentless air strikes that it says target Hamas militants but in the process kill scores of civilians on a near-daily basis, according to local health authorities.

The IDF's implicit strategy, according to one senior Israeli military official, is to keep increasing the pressure on Hamas to agree to Israel's terms in the ceasefire talks.

"We are approaching a very crucial crossroads," Israeli military chief Eyal Zamir told troops in Beit Hanoun last week. "If an agreement is reached, we will pause and reposition along lines defined by the political echelon.

"If no deal is reached, my directive . . . is to intensify and expand combat operations as much as possible."

Yet there are clear signs of disagreement between the IDF and Netanyahu's government over what they think Israel's next steps should be.

Zamir and the IDF's senior leadership are in favour of a ceasefire deal to initially return at least half of the remaining hostages, according to two people familiar with Israeli government deliberations.







Israeli military chief Eyal Zamir: 'If no deal is reached, my directive...is to intensify and expand combat operations as much as possible' © Ronen Zvulun/Reuters

The alternative, the generals say, is in effect the reconquering of the entire strip, including sending forces into new areas such as Deir al-Balah that could imperil hostages' lives, with the full burden of administering the territory falling on the IDF.

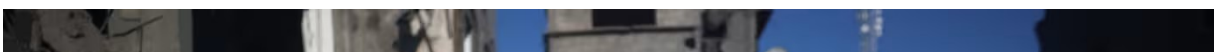
But for supporters of the [war](#), ensuring that Hamas is “eliminated” will require further military action, either to force it to demobilise or to fully and finally defeat it on the battlefield. Netanyahu has said he will only end the war once all the hostages are returned, Hamas disarms and Gaza “no longer poses a threat to Israel”.

Anything short of that, the Israeli premier said in a Facebook video last week, would sow the seeds of another October 7, in which Hamas killed 1,200 people and took about 250 hostages, according to Israeli figures.

If Hamas did not lay down its weapons, “you need to get to every point in Gaza, to kill the remaining fighters and eliminate [Hamas] capabilities”, said Yaakov Amidror, a former national security adviser to the prime minister now at the JINSA think-tank in Washington.

Otherwise, Amidror argued, no other actor would be willing or able to take over governance of the strip, even with Hamas “no longer relevant” as a genuine military threat to Israel.

“That’s what the war is now,” he added, stressing that if no deal were reached with Hamas, “all of Gaza will be like Rafah”.





Most of Gaza lies in ruins, with almost 60,000 Palestinians killed, according to local officials © Eyad Baba/AFP/Getty Images

Far-right members of Netanyahu's government have gone further, openly talking about reoccupying and resettling Gaza.

Defence minister Israel Katz and finance minister Bezalel Smotrich have in recent weeks pushed the army to prepare a "humanitarian city" in the Rafah area, to which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians would be forcibly moved with no ability to return.

The IDF's top generals strongly oppose the scheme, according to a person familiar with the matter, over concerns that it violates international law and is impractical. The proposal has been condemned around the world as tantamount to ethnic cleansing.

Without a negotiated resolution, the people of Gaza will continue to pay an intolerable price, with the vast majority of the population already displaced multiple times and on the verge of famine, according to international aid groups.

But with no end in sight, domestic critics such as Milshtein warn that Gaza has become what he calls the "capital of Israeli fantasies": a place in which the country's leaders tell themselves and their public stories of an imminent but unrealistic



---

“victory”.

“It’s the story of this war,” Milshtein said. “Lots of tactical achievements, without any strategic achievement.”

---

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

---

### **Follow the topics in this article**

---

Middle Eastern politics & society

Israel-Hamas war

FT Edit

Hamas

Israel Defense Forces