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MAY 10, 2024

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## What Hamas Wants in Postwar Gaza

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The Power to Fight Without the Burden of  
Governing

MATTHEW LEVITT

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# What Hamas Wants in Postwar Gaza

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## The Power to Fight Without the Burden of Governing

MATTHEW LEVITT

**O**n May 6, in an effort to forestall an all-but-certain Israeli operation in Rafah, Hamas leaders said that they might be prepared to accept a hostage-for-prisoners agreement with Israel. Coming after weeks of stonewalling by Hamas, the announcement raised hopes in Washington that some kind of deal might still be reached that could free dozens of hostages and bring about a pause in Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip. But even now, it remained unclear how committed Hamas was to carrying out this deal, or whether it was simply seeking a means to preserve its Rafah stronghold, where Israel believes its remaining brigades and Gaza-based leadership are holed up.

After seven months of war in Gaza, the Israel-Hamas conflict has caused untold devastation to the more than two million Gazans that Hamas claims to represent and has all but destroyed Hamas's governance project in the strip. It is worth asking two basic questions: What are Hamas's goals? And what is its strategy for achieving them?

With its heinous October 7 assault on Israel, Hamas sought to put itself and the Palestinian issue back at the center of the international agenda, even if that meant destroying much of Gaza itself. The attack was also meant to thwart a possible normalization pact between Israel and Saudi Arabia that would promote Palestinian moderates and sideline Hamas.

But Hamas's leaders also have political aims that may at first seem counterintuitive. They are trying to relieve themselves of the sole burden of governing the Gaza Strip, which had become an impediment to achieving the group's goal of destroying Israel. And as talks hosted by China in early May between Hamas and Fatah officials have underscored, the Hamas leadership is also trying to jump-start a process of reconciliation with Fatah and the Palestinian Authority (PA), which Fatah controls, despite years of fierce hostility between the two groups.

Those goals, in turn, serve a deeper purpose. In seeking to force a new governance structure on Gaza and to refashion the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in its own image, Hamas hopes to impose a Hezbollah model on the territory. Like Hezbollah, the heavily armed, Iranian-backed Shiite militant movement in Lebanon, Hamas wants a future in which it is both a part of, and apart from, whatever Palestinian governance structure next emerges in Gaza. That way, as with Hezbollah in Lebanon, it hopes to wield political and military dominance in Gaza and ultimately the West Bank without bearing any of the accountability that comes from ruling alone. To understand this larger Hamas project and its important implications for Israel and the region, it is necessary to examine the evolution of Hamas in the years leading up to the October 7 attack and what Hamas hoped to achieve by murdering and kidnapping scores of Israeli civilians.

#### CHANGING THE EQUATION

Four days after October 7, a Hamas official publicly acknowledged that the group had been secretly planning the attack for more than two years. After a brief war with Israel in May 2021, Hamas leaders reassessed their fundamental aims. At that point, they had ruled the Gaza Strip for 14 years—having seized full control from the PA in 2007, two years after an

Israeli withdrawal—and could have continued to maintain the status quo. Notwithstanding intermittent skirmishes with Israel, Hamas was firmly ensconced in Gaza and sustained by hundreds of millions of dollars in aid from the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA, and in funds from Qatar to cover public salaries.

But shortly after the 2021 war, Hamas's leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, presented Israel with what he described as two alternative outcomes. In an appearance on Al Jazeera, the Qatari-funded satellite network, Sinwar stressed that Hamas continued to aim for the “eradication” of Israel but that he was amenable to entering a long-term truce with the country—provided that Israel agreed to a laundry list of demands, including dismantling all settlements, releasing Palestinian prisoners, and allowing a Palestinian right of return. But any such truce, he said, would be temporary and driven by the imperative of achieving unity among Palestinian factions, presumably meaning support for Hamas's position of ultimately eradicating Israel.

Sinwar also boasted that Hamas was already in contact with its “brothers in Lebanon” (Hezbollah) and with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and suggested that these allies would have supported Hamas in the 2021 war if it had intensified. Soon, Hamas began meeting regularly with officials from Iran and Hezbollah. Four months later, Hamas also sponsored a conference in Gaza hosted by Sinwar himself that was devoted to plans for the “liberation of Palestine” once Israel “disappears.” The conference called for replacing the PLO with a new Council for the Liberation of Palestine that would include “all Palestinian and Arab forces who endorse the idea of liberating Palestine, with the backing of friendly forces.”

At the same time, instead of prioritizing its governance project in the Gaza Strip, Hamas began to secretly put in play a long-held but still notional plan to launch a ground assault on Israel and initiate what it hoped would be a chain reaction that would lead to the destruction of Israel. The group's leaders pretended to be focused on governing Gaza and addressing the needs of Palestinians living there, while in fact they were

stockpiling small arms and, as a Hamas official named Khalil al-Hayya later conceded, “preparing for this big attack.” Ultimately, as al-Hayya put it, Hamas concluded that it needed to “change the entire equation” with Israel.

#### NOW OR NEVER

With planning for the October 7 attack already well underway, Hamas leaders became increasingly convinced of the urgency of doing something drastic. First, the movement’s support in Gaza appeared to be eroding. Israel’s pre-October 7 strategy toward Hamas was based on buying calm by allowing Qatari funds to flow into Gaza in the hopes that this would decrease support for Hamas militancy among the Gazan population.

For all the criticism Israel has faced for this approach in the months since Hamas’s attack, there is some indication that it was working. Polling conducted in July 2023 by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion, for example, revealed that 72 percent of Gazans agreed that “Hamas has been unable to improve the lives of Palestinians in Gaza” and that 70 percent supported the proposal that Hamas’s rival, the PA, take over security in Gaza. Looking at these numbers, Hamas could only have concluded that its governance project in Gaza was floundering.

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Hamas knew the Israeli response would end its governance project in Gaza.

Hamas also feared Israeli normalization with Saudi Arabia. The Saudis were demanding that Israel take tangible and irreversible steps toward a two-state solution and that Washington enter into a formal security treaty with Riyadh; in exchange, the Saudis would formally recognize Israel. Most Palestinians likely saw progress on Palestinian statehood as a good thing, but not Hamas, which has always been dead set against a two-state solution and committed to Israel’s destruction. Hamas also understood that under a two-state solution both sides would be expected to clamp down on their respective violent extremists, which would not bode well for Hamas and its allies.

At the same time, Hamas likely saw prolonged instability in Israel as a golden opportunity. Alongside rising violence in the West Bank and

clashes between Palestinian worshipers and Israeli security forces at Jerusalem's al Aqsa mosque, Netanyahu's right-wing government had faced months of protests over its proposed judicial reforms. The heightened tensions in the West Bank—driven in part by the efforts of Hamas's external leaders, such as Salah al-Aroui, to instigate attacks against Israelis—the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had moved more resources there, leaving the Gazan border more vulnerable.

It was amid these developments that Hamas decided to launch its October 7 attack. Harking back to Sinwar's 2021 conference, in which he had threatened to respond to actions that Hamas perceived as undermining Palestinian claims to Jerusalem, Hamas called the October 7 operation "the al Aqsa Flood."

**"WE NEED THIS BLOOD"**

From the outset of its planning, Hamas anticipated that its invasion of southern Israel would draw Israel into a larger conflict, one that it hoped Hezbollah and other members of Iran's "axis of resistance" would quickly join. (It is now understood that Hamas kept the precise details of its attack, including the exact date, closely held, but Iran and Hezbollah were aware of the general concept.) Hamas leaders also planned for the possibility that the attack could achieve more, including a scenario in which Gaza-based Hamas militants would link up with fighters in the West Bank and follow up on the initial assault by targeting Israeli cities and military bases. To this end, when they broke out of Gaza on October 7, Hamas militants were carrying enough food and gear to last several days.

Israeli forces ultimately disrupted those maximalist plans, but before they could regain control of the border areas around Gaza, the Hamas attackers committed horrific atrocities, murdering around 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals, taking more than 200 hostages, and recording and broadcasting their crimes. Hamas even used stolen phones to hijack victims' social media and WhatsApp accounts, from which it livestreamed attacks, issued threats to victims' families, and called for further acts of violence. Israeli forces later found documents on the bodies of slain

Hamas attackers instructing them to “kill as many people as possible” and “capture hostages.” One document specifically directed operatives to target children at an elementary school and a youth center.

In orchestrating and sensationalizing this mayhem, Hamas sought to provoke Israel into a major land invasion of Gaza. A core pillar of this strategy was to start a war that would cause high numbers of Palestinian casualties, as Hamas’s political leader in Doha, Ismail Haniyeh, bluntly confirmed in a video address days after October 7: “We are the ones who need this blood, so it awakens within us the revolutionary spirit, so it awakens within us resolve, so it awakens with us the spirit of challenge and [pushes us] to move forward.”

It was not by accident that Hamas built more than 300 miles of tunnels in Gaza to protect its fighters but not a single bomb shelter to protect Palestinian civilians. Hamas knew full well that the Israeli response would lead to civilian Palestinian casualties—and that it would also end the Hamas governance project in Gaza, a responsibility that the group was eager to relinquish.

#### CATASTROPHIC SUCCESS

Despite its own maximalist aspirations to reach Tel Aviv and connect with fellow militants in Hebron, Hamas appears to have been unprepared for its initial success on October 7. Hamas was able to get far more of its fighters into Israel than it had expected, having anticipated that Israeli security systems and forces would kill and capture more attackers along the border than they did. Moreover, two additional waves of attackers followed as news spread in Gaza that Hamas had breached the border fence. The first included members of other terrorist groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine; the second included unaffiliated Gazans, many of whom killed, kidnapped, and carried out other atrocities in Israeli communities near the border.

Although the attack went unchecked for hours, and it took Israeli forces days to apprehend or kill all the attackers and regain control of the border, it did not produce several of Hamas’s hoped-for outcomes. For one thing,



Israel did not immediately launch a land war in Gaza, in which Hamas thought it would have a major advantage because of its tunnel network. Instead, Israel took a couple of weeks to plan its response, which started with a punishing air offensive followed weeks later by a combined air and ground offensive aimed at uprooting the military infrastructure Hamas had built within and under civilian communities.

Nor did Hezbollah and other members of the axis of resistance launch a full-scale attack on Israel. When Iran carried out a major attack in April in response to an Israeli strike on senior Iranian commanders in Syria, Israeli and allied air defenses largely neutralized what proved to be a one-off operation. Both Hezbollah and Iran, Hamas's most powerful allies, were keen to join the fight, but neither wanted a full-scale war.

In short, the Israel-Hamas war has been devastating, but it has not set off a regional war that threatens Israel's survival—and Hamas is fine with that, for now. For Hamas, strategic patience is a virtue. Although the group planned for the possibility of still greater success, its primary goal was to initiate a longer and inexorable process leading to Israel's destruction. To do that, Hamas needed to get out from under the burden of governing the Gaza Strip, which it had concluded was undermining rather than enabling its attacks on Israel. Freed of that responsibility, Hamas could now pledge "to repeat the October 7 attack, time and again, until Israel is annihilated."

#### THE HEZBOLLAH MODEL

In launching the October 7 attack, Hamas upended the status quo in Gaza. Less noted has been what it wants instead. In fact, as debate ensues over postwar administration of the strip, Hamas has begun to lay the groundwork for reconciling with and ultimately taking over the PLO, thereby guaranteeing that it is part of whatever governance structure emerges. Al-Hayya, the Hamas official who explained that his group wanted to change the whole equation, recently acknowledged this plan and has floated the idea of a five-year truce with Israel based on the armistice lines that existed before the 1967 war and on a unified Palestinian government that controls both the West Bank and Gaza Strip.



Indeed, since December, senior leaders from Hamas have been meeting with factions of Fatah that are opposed to Mahmoud Abbas, the deeply unpopular leader of the PA, to discuss just such a rapprochement. On April 21, Haniyeh explicitly proposed restructuring the PLO to include all Palestinian factions.

For a militant Islamist movement that has long disavowed the more moderate and secular Palestinian Authority, seeking to join forces with the PLO may seem surprising. But behind Hamas's recent push is the more important strategic goal of emulating the Hezbollah model. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is nominally part of the weak Lebanese state, allowing it to influence policy and have at least some say in directing government funds, yet it maintains complete autonomy in running its own powerful military and in fighting Israel. Under a new arrangement for Gaza and the West Bank, Hamas hopes to exert the same influence and independence with its own movement and militia, neither beholden to nor controlled by a government.

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Hamas has laid the groundwork for reconciling with and ultimately taking over the PLO.

In fact, Hamas's leaders in Gaza looked to Hezbollah for guidance as they planned the October 7 attack, which came straight out of Hezbollah's playbook. Although Hamas's external leadership in Qatar, Turkey, and Lebanon has been more interested in bringing the war to a close, Sinwar—who holds most of the cards by virtue of being on the ground in Gaza and controlling the Israeli hostages—is fixated on absorbing Israel's hits, surviving, and declaring "divine victory." He is clearly looking to the 2006 war with Israel, in which Hezbollah became the first Arab army not to be destroyed by the IDF, despite heavy losses, and enjoyed a significant boost to its regional stature as a result. Surviving the Israeli military offensive, Sinwar appears to have calculated, would position him well for a senior position in a future Palestinian government.

Of course, the idea that Sinwar might have a future place in a Palestinian unity government is preposterous, and not only because of the

heinous nature of what Hamas did on October 7. After all, as a longtime sworn enemy of Fatah and the PA, Hamas took over the Gaza Strip by armed force in 2007 after a civil war with Fatah. Moreover, the Biden administration has explicitly ruled out any postwar governance structure that includes Hamas. But without a concerted effort to fully dismantle the group's political infrastructure in Gaza and build alternatives, Hamas may yet succeed in positioning itself to be one of several parties in control when the fighting stops.

Should that happen, Hamas might well adopt other aspects of the Hezbollah approach. Just as Hezbollah has used its haven in Lebanon to launch cross-border attacks on Israel as terrorist plots against Israelis and Jews around the world, Hamas could expand its military operations beyond the borders of Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip and carry out plausibly deniable terrorist attacks abroad. So far, Hamas has never carried out an international terrorist attack—although it has come close on several occasions. But since October 7, European intelligence agencies have discovered Hamas plots in Germany and Sweden, as well as logistical operations in Bulgaria, Denmark, and the Netherlands.

#### PREVENTING A POSTWAR VICTORY

Notwithstanding Hamas's belated announcement in early May that it might approve some version of a hostage-for-prisoners deal, Biden administration officials have long blamed Hamas's leadership for prolonging the war by not releasing the Israeli hostages and laying down arms. But they are not the only ones. There are indications that Gazans themselves, increasingly desperate after nearly seven months of devastating war, are losing patience with the movement and its failure to take steps to protect them from the Israeli retaliation Hamas was determined to provoke. "I pray every day for the death of Sinwar," one Gazan told the *Financial Times* in April. Polling by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research suggests that over the past three months, Hamas's popularity has dropped by about a quarter, from 43 percent to 34 percent. "Almost everyone around me shares the same thoughts," a

freelance journalist in Gaza told *The Washington Post* recently. “We want this waterfall of blood to stop.”

Hunkered down in their underground tunnels, Hamas’s leaders are surely aware that the civilians they have left unprotected aboveground are growing increasingly angry at the movement, which may account for the more moderate tone of some statements the movement’s leaders have recently released. But they are wary of agreeing to any swap of hostages for prisoners that does not come with a complete cease-fire and save the remaining Hamas battalions in Rafah. Indeed, poor polling numbers are likely only to underscore the importance of securing a position within whatever governance structure comes next—one in which Hamas will not be the only party ruling Gaza and therefore not the one blamed when things don’t go well. Hamas understands that after it releases the remaining hostages, the best leverage it will have is its remaining fighting cadre.

So as Hamas sees it, it must first secure a Hezbollah-style victory, simply by surviving. Then, it must adopt a Hezbollah model in its relation to the postwar governance structure that emerges—joining with the PLO and changing the Palestinian movement from within while maintaining Hamas as an independent fighting force. For Hamas, this would be a return to first principles: it could pursue its fundamental commitment to destroying Israel and replacing it with an Islamist Palestinian state in all of what it considers historic Palestine.

To arrest this plan before it is set in motion, it will be paramount for Israel, the United States, and their Arab and Western allies to keep Hamas out of whatever Palestinian governance structure is built. If they do not, the group could soon create a situation that is far more dangerous and destabilizing than the one that allowed it to launch the October 7 attack. The peril lies in the fact that both Hamas and Hezbollah truly believe that Israel’s destruction is inevitable, and that October 7 is simply the beginning of an irreversible process that will ultimately achieve just that. Anyone who truly supports the idea of securing a durable settlement to this conflict must oppose including Hamas in Palestinian governance

for the simple reason that Hamas's fundamental goals are incompatible with peace.