

Netanyahu and Hamas Set to Coexist Uneasily Again

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Brief Analysis

The prime minister's return to power is unlikely to change either side's status-quo calculations about Gaza, though Washington should still keep an eye on potential wild cards such as spillover from Temple Mount tensions and Iranian meddling.

As Israel's government formation talks near a decision, Binyamin Netanyahu seems certain to return to office as prime minister with a majority of sixty-four Knesset members now formally in his corner. Pundits are already prognosticating how this right-wing takeover will affect Jerusalem's ties with Americans, Arabs, Russians, Turks, and others.

Yet one crucial element largely missing from this discourse is the future of Israel's relations with Hamas and its Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) sidekicks in Gaza, where no less than four mini-wars have been fought since December 2008. Instead, observers have focused more on potential West Bank scenarios such as rising tensions over Israeli settlers, the (unlikely) collapse of the Palestinian Authority, and sporadic waves of supposedly "lone wolf" but no less deadly terrorist attacks. Yet while all of these concerns are important, the fact remains that for nearly two decades now, Israel's most serious armed confrontations with Palestinians have occurred on the southern front with Gaza.

This analytical oversight is almost certainly due to the fact that few expect much change in the protracted stalemate between these long-time antagonists, occasionally punctuated by sharp bursts of combat. Regardless of who ends up as Israel's new defense minister, the government will likely have zero interest in pursuing—let alone initiating—another large-scale but inconclusive military skirmish against Hamas. On the contrary, the bulk of Israeli policy toward Gaza will likely continue to be set by the professional military and the Shin Bet, which have long preferred a posture of "keeping the calm" there as much as possible. Barring unexpected shocks, this probably means that Israel will maintain, and even gradually expand, its [economic lifeline to Gaza](#).

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/responding-pas-mounting-fiscal-crisis>.

Currently, this lifeline includes the following: daily work and entry permits to Israel for over 17,000 Gazans; daily permission for hundreds of heavy cargo trucks crossing the border in both directions; supervised offshore fishing rights; permission for regular distribution of cash and goods by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), Egyptian vendors, and other international and Gulf Arab donors; and continuous provision of water and electricity. So long as Hamas largely refrains from rocket attacks against Israel, these very tangible incentives for continued calm can be expected to persist under a new Netanyahu-led government.

For its part, Hamas has demonstrated its clear intention to focus inward on its Gaza sanctuary rather than actively outward against Israel—at least for the time being, and at least on the southern front (see below). In sharp contrast to Palestinian Authority officials in the West Bank, Hamas leaders have generally avoided major public denunciations of Netanyahu's return. More concretely, just one minor rocket attack has been launched from Gaza since his November 1 election victory. And true to form, Israel responded with just a few perfunctory airstrikes against isolated targets. Shortly thereafter, some reports (disputed by other sources) claimed that Hamas even arrested a handful of PIJ or other “rogue” militants that it alleged were responsible for this breach of quiet.

In another sign of this relatively “moderate” tack, Hamas recently permitted thousands of local Fatah supporters to publicly commemorate the anniversary of Yasser Arafat's death. This was the first time in many years that such a gathering had been allowed in Gaza.

Perhaps most tellingly of all, the group has publicly acknowledged that it aims to take the fight to Israel in the West Bank for now rather than on its own turf in Gaza. In a television interview on the eve of Israel's election, senior Hamas official Mahmoud al-Zahar uttered this remarkable assertion: “I am against conducting periodic wars in Gaza [against Israel], but there must be periodic wars in the West Bank.” He then rationalized this position by invoking Islamic law: “Do you think that if we have the opportunity to support our brothers in the West Bank, we should not seize that opportunity? Is there justification in the sharia for [not supporting them]?...We should support them with words, with money, weapons; we can support them by helping them to better define their vision, by praying for them from afar.” For all the reported tactical differences among various Hamas officers and factions, none has been heard to contradict this view lately, including the group's leader Yahya al-Sinwar.

What Do Polls Say?

An oft-overlooked factor in the cautious calculations on both sides is public opinion. In Israel—perhaps the most heavily surveyed population per capita in the world—pollsters rarely ask about Gaza anymore; the topic is hardly even on the agenda for public debate. Most citizens across the political spectrum seem resigned to an indefinite continuation of the proverbially “unsustainable” status quo on that front, including sporadic episodes of Palestinian rocket fire and Israeli military responses (aka “mowing the grass”). The exceptions lie mainly in communities bordering Gaza, which are generally outside the base of Israel's newly ascendant religious far right. The latter constituency and the parties representing it are heavily oriented east toward Jerusalem and the West Bank, not south toward Gaza.

On the other side of the border, Hamas pays pretty close attention to the results of public opinion polls on these issues (including Washington Institute surveys organized by the author). Although their government is certainly not a democratic one, the group's leaders know they are much more popular in the West Bank than among their own subjects in Gaza, so they are wary of antagonizing the local population any more than necessary.

Regarding views on Israel, the trends in Gazan public opinion are abundantly clear. The **[latest credible survey \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-poll-shows-gazans-pragmatic-now-not-long-term\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-poll-shows-gazans-pragmatic-now-not-long-term)**, from June of this year, indicates that two-thirds of the population want Hamas to preserve a ceasefire. The same percentage want more economic ties with Israel—a thirteen-point increase since the previous pre-COVID survey in

February 2020. And just over half (53 percent) agree with the following deliberately controversial statement (despite their certain knowledge that it is not the politically correct view): “ Hamas should stop calling for Israel’s destruction, and accept a permanent two-state solution based on the 1967 boundaries.”

Two Wild Cards: Temple Mount and Iran

Notwithstanding all these constraints, two wild cards from opposite ends of the deck could conceivably upset this fragile equilibrium. The first is the potential for major trouble on the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem, which could give Hamas an irresistible pretext to pose as the holy site’s “defender” by launching rocket barrages at Israeli civilian targets. This risk will grow again next spring as major Muslim and Jewish holidays approach.

Yet even actors on Israel’s newly empowered religious far right—whether Bezael Smotrich, Itamar Ben-Gvir, or other varieties—now seem more conscious of this danger. For example, Smotrich, the head of the Religious Zionism party, recently told a local audience that he has “grown up,” while Otzma Yehudit leader Ben-Gvir has toned down his longstanding focus on the Temple Mount and concentrated more on Hebron and other West Bank settlements/outposts, Sabbath observance, and gender issues. In any case, Netanyahu would likely relish the role of reining in such firebrands when it comes to the highly inflammatory Jerusalem file.

The other wild card is much further afield in Iran. Given the [ongoing mass protests \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/conversation-masih-alinejad\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/conversation-masih-alinejad) against the regime, Tehran may be tempted to deflect attention by scapegoating Israel for the crisis, perhaps firing up its PIJ and [Hamas clients \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-iran-fuels-hamas-terrorism\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-iran-fuels-hamas-terrorism) in Gaza. On balance, however, the severity of this internal trouble will probably steer the regime away from any major military escalation against Israel right now. Instead, Iran might continue taking aim at smaller, softer, more remote targets, such as its recent failed assassination plot against an Israeli citizen in Georgia or its minor explosive drone strike on an Israeli-owned oil tanker in the Gulf of Oman.

Interestingly, both Hamas and the people of Gaza appear to concur that Iran should avoid provoking Israel too much. A senior Hamas official visiting Lebanon this month publicly blessed Beirut’s [new maritime accord \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-make-most-israel-lebanon-maritime-deal\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-make-most-israel-lebanon-maritime-deal) with Israel, perhaps hoping for a similar offshore natural gas deal someday. And the aforementioned June poll showed a slim majority (55 percent) of Gazans agreeing with this bold judgment: “Wherever Iran intervenes in the region, it hurts the local Arabs and doesn’t help the Palestinians.”

For the longer term, the tragic truth is that no one has a satisfactory solution for the many problems of Gaza. In the short term, however, any alarmism about how Netanyahu’s election might affect these issues is almost surely misplaced. In other words, the United States and other interested parties have a bit more space to deal with pressing issues on other fronts.

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