

# I Might Have Once Favored a Cease-Fire with Hamas, but Not Now

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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## A perceived victory by the group will validate its ideology of rejection, give momentum to Iran and its collaborators, and foreclose the possibility of peace with Israel.

**F**or 35 years, I've devoted my professional life to U.S. peacemaking policy and conflict resolution and planning—whether in the former Soviet Union, a reunified Germany or postwar Iraq. But nothing has preoccupied me like finding a peaceful and lasting solution between Israel and the Palestinians.

In the past, I might have favored a cease-fire with Hamas during a conflict with Israel. But today it is clear to me that peace is not going to be possible now or in the future as long as Hamas remains intact and in control of Gaza.

Hamas's power and ability to threaten Israel—and subject Gazan civilians to ever more rounds of violence—must end.

After Oct. 7, there are many Israelis who believe their survival as a state is at stake. That may sound like an exaggeration, but to them, it's not. If Hamas persists as a military force and is still running Gaza after this war is over, it will attack Israel again. And whether or not Hezbollah opens a true second front from Lebanon during this conflict, it, too, will attack Israel in the future. The aim of these groups, both of which are backed by Iran, is to make Israel unlivable and drive Israelis to leave: While Iran has denied involvement in the Hamas attack, Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, has long talked about Israel **not surviving for another 25 years**

**(<https://www.timesofisrael.com/khamenei-israel-wont-survive-next-25-years/>)**, and his strategy has been to

use these militant proxies to achieve that goal.

Given the strength of Israel's military—by far the most powerful in the region—the aims of Iran and its collaborators seemed implausible until a few weeks ago. But the events of Oct. 7 changed everything. As one commander in the Israeli military **said (<https://www.maariv.co.il/journalists/Article-1046213>)**, “If we do not defeat Hamas, we cannot survive here.”

Israel is not alone in believing it must defeat Hamas. Over the past two weeks, when I talked to Arab officials throughout the region whom I have long known, every single one told me that Hamas must be destroyed in Gaza. They made clear that if Hamas is perceived as winning, it will validate the group's ideology of rejection, give leverage and momentum to Iran and its collaborators and put their own governments on the defensive.

But they said this in private. Their public postures have been quite different. Only a few Arab states openly condemned the Hamas massacre of more than 1,400 people in Israel. Why? Because Arab leaders understood that as Israel retaliated and Palestinian casualties and suffering grew, their own citizens would be outraged and they needed to be seen as standing up for the Palestinians, at least rhetorically.

Nowhere was the instinct to cater to the mood of the street more vividly revealed than in the quick denunciations of Israel after Hamas claimed that Israel bombed Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza. Israel has denied hitting the hospital but in several Arab countries, Hamas's claims were accepted. At this point, multiple national intelligence agencies have said it was most likely a Palestinian rocket that hit the hospital.

Nevertheless, people across the region—and the world—saw Israel bombing Gaza and were ready to believe this, too, was deliberately done. Even the United Arab Emirates, which had condemned the Hamas attack, issued a later statement condemning “the Israeli attack that targeted Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital in the Gaza Strip, resulting in the death and injury of hundreds of people.” It went on to call on “the international community to intensify efforts to reach an immediate cease-fire to prevent further loss of life.”

As Israel's aerial bombardment of Gaza picks up in pace and civilian casualties rise, international calls for an immediate cease-fire are mounting. Some are calling for Israel to call off a ground invasion. But ending the war now would mean Hamas would win. At present, its military infrastructure still exists, its leadership remains largely intact, and its political control of Gaza is unchallenged. As Hamas did after conflicts with Israel in 2009, 2012, 2014 and 2021, the group will almost certainly rearm and restore. It will be able to add to its system of tunnels running under the enclave. The strip will remain impoverished, and the next round of war will be inevitable, holding both Gazan civilians and much of the rest of the Middle East hostage to Hamas's aims.

An Israeli ground campaign would come at an extremely high cost. If it proceeds, invading Israeli soldiers will surely lose their lives, and there will be even more Palestinian casualties, a tragedy Hamas has ensured by embedding itself and its military capability in communities, using hospitals, mosques and schools to store its ammunition. But defeating Hamas cannot be done only with strategic strikes from the air, any more than we were able to **root out (<https://www.rand.org/blog/rand-review/2022/07/civilian-casualties-lessons-from-the-battle-for-raqqa.html>)** ISIS in Mosul, Iraq, or Raqqa, Syria, from the air. In that fight, the United States had local partners who did the terrible and costly ground fighting in cities while our forces largely devastated them from above.

What would a defeat of Hamas mean? It would mean its military infrastructure, much of which is physically connected to civilian infrastructure, was largely destroyed and its leadership decimated, leaving the group without the capacity to block a reconstruction for demilitarization formula for Gaza, as it did in the past. In essence, this would mean there would be no war-making capacity in Gaza and that capacity could not be rebuilt.

That formula must guide the day-after reality in Gaza. It would require Israel to remain in Gaza after the fighting ends until it could hand over to some kind of an interim administration to prevent a vacuum and begin the enormous

task of reconstruction. That administration should be largely run by Palestinian technocrats—from Gaza, the West Bank or the diaspora—under an international umbrella, which would include Arab and non-Arab nations. The United States would need to mobilize and organize the effort, possibly using an umbrella like the United Nations or the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee donor group to the Palestinians or even acting on the [proposal \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/24/israel-hamas-gaza-war-airstrikes/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/24/israel-hamas-gaza-war-airstrikes/) by President Emmanuel Macron of France to use the international anti-ISIS coalition to counter Hamas. Such a coalition could help create the division of labor that would be necessary.

For example, Morocco, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain could provide police—not military forces—to ensure security for the new civil administration and those responsible for reconstruction. Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E and Qatar could provide the bulk of the funding for reconstruction, explaining their roles as necessary to relieve the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza and help them recover. Canada and others could provide monitoring mechanisms to ensure that assistance would go to its intended purposes.

Of course, the mood in Gaza after the fighting is over will be grim and angry. Thousands of civilians have been killed, according to the Hamas-run Gazan Health Ministry. Vast swaths of the enclave are uninhabitable. But it is worth noting that polls taken not long before the Oct. 7 attack [revealed \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/polls-show-majority-gazans-were-against-breaking-ceasefire-hamas-and-hezbollah\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/polls-show-majority-gazans-were-against-breaking-ceasefire-hamas-and-hezbollah) that 62 percent of Gazans were against Hamas breaking the cease-fire at the time with Israel. Getting aid into Gaza quickly and starting the reconstruction effort as soon as the fighting stops could help show residents that life can get better when Hamas is no longer preventing the rebuilding of Gaza.

How Israel would conduct a ground campaign would affect all of this and even whether such a day-after reality could materialize. For Israel to reduce the pressure from its neighbors and the international community to stop its attack, it must demonstrate more convincingly that it is fighting Hamas and is not trying to punish Palestinian civilians. It must create safe corridors for humanitarian assistance, including from Israeli territory through the Kerem Shalom crossing point. To alleviate the suffering, it should allow international groups, such as Doctors Without Borders, to operate safely there and include Israeli doctors who can set up field hospitals—something they have experience doing in Syria and Ukraine.

Israel's political leaders need to clearly and publicly emphasize they will leave Gaza and lift the siege after Hamas has been militarily defeated and largely disarmed. They must communicate that they understand a political resolution is needed with the Palestinians more generally. That is not a message Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is now conveying, given the shock in Israel and the makeup of his government. But it is one Israel's partners in the region need to hear—and soon.

There are no easy solutions to Gaza, but there is only one path forward in this war. An outcome that leaves Hamas in control will doom not just Gaza but also much of the rest of the Middle East.

*Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on [the New York Times website \(https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/27/opinion/hamas-war-gaza-israel.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/27/opinion/hamas-war-gaza-israel.html).* ❖

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