



# The Hamas-Israel War

## An Early Assessment

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Left: Loved ones welcome released hostage Eitan Abraham Mor in Petah Tikva, Israel, on October 13; right: Hamas militants stand guard near Gaza City on December 8.

GUY ANTONOVSKY/GPO/  
HANDOUT VIA REUTERS;  
REUTERS/DAWOUD ABU ALKAS

**W**ho won the Hamas-Israel war? According to President Trump, the outcome is clear. As he said from the rostrum of Israel's Knesset in October 2025:

So Israel, with our help, has won all that they can by force of arms. You've won. I mean, you've won. Now it's time to translate these victories against terrorists on the battlefield into the ultimate prize of peace and prosperity for the entire Middle East. It's about time you were able to enjoy the fruits of your labor.<sup>1</sup>

Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has been marginally more circumspect. While he has not formally declared "total victory," as he promised the U.S. Congress in July 2024,<sup>2</sup> he did welcome the Trump-negotiated ceasefire as achieving all Israel's war aims: "Your plan," said Netanyahu standing next to Trump in the White House in late September 2025,

is consistent with the five principles my government set for the end of the war and the day after Hamas. Everybody asked, "What is your plan for the day after Hamas?" Here's our plan. Passed it in the cabinet. All our hostages, both those who are alive and those who died, all of them, will return home immediately. Hamas will be disarmed. Gaza will be demilitarized. Israel will retain security responsibility, including a security perimeter for the foreseeable future. And lastly, Gaza will have a peaceful civilian administration that is run neither by Hamas nor by the Palestinian Authority.<sup>3</sup>

Hamas tells a different story. Endorsing the ceasefire agreement while marking the second anniversary of the October 7 attack, Hamas leader Khalil al-Hayya praised the people of Gaza who were able to "make all the plans of the enemy fail, including the famine and the anarchy that they started to provoke. You were aware and you were able to make all their objectives fail." He called the war's outcome "a victory for resistance and steadfastness."<sup>4</sup>

Inside Israel, a few lone voices—almost exclusively on the far right—echo Hamas's assessment that the ceasefire should be interpreted as a strategic failure. This includes two influential members of the governing coalition—National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich—as well as a small number of parliamentarians from Netanyahu's own governing Likud Party, such as Amit Halevi, who boycotted Trump's Knesset speech, saying the ceasefire deal would push Israel "into the gates of hell."<sup>5</sup>

Unusually, outside these fringe figures, the normally disputatious Israeli public debate is largely silent on the issue. Most likely, mainstream Israelis feel constrained from having a sober discussion of the

war because of the near miraculous release of all live hostages and return of the remains of virtually all the dead hostages, an objective few independent observers thought possible. Since just about every leading Israeli politician and national security expert advised the government to prioritize a diplomatic path to secure the hostages' release, adding that the Hamas challenge could be addressed once they were home, few now appear willing to debate the outcome of a strategic choice they so recently and passionately advocated. (From faraway America, I too advocated this prioritization.)

Of course, after just three months, it may be too soon to offer a judicious assessment of the outcome of the Gaza war, let alone the implications of the broader set of conflicts of the past two years (e.g., Israel vs. Iran, Israel vs. Hezbollah, Israel vs. the Houthis), a discussion of which falls outside the scope of this paper. With the passage of time, achievements that look flimsy today may grow firm and clear—and vice versa. Moreover, actions taken by key actors will continue to define the war, its outcome, and its implications for some time. So, an assessment of the war just ninety days after the guns (largely) fell silent is just that—a snapshot of a fluid and continually changing situation.

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## Israel: Two of Five Aims Achieved

That said, this much is clear: only two of the five war aims articulated by Netanyahu at the White House—and previously endorsed by the Israeli government—have been implemented: the return of the hostages and establishment of a significant Israel Defense Forces (IDF) security perimeter within Gaza to prevent an October 7–style recurrence. Despite considerable diplomatic activity, none of the other three aims has been achieved and, more important, none seems even to be on the horizon: the disarmament of Hamas, the demilitarization of Gaza, and the creation of a peaceful Palestinian-led civilian administration led by neither Hamas nor the Palestinian Authority.

Instead, the most likely scenario is an ad hoc postwar status quo in which Gaza is effectively divided between an Israel-controlled zone, covering approximately 53 percent of the territory and including about 15 percent of the population, and a Hamas-controlled zone, covering approximately 47 percent of the territory and including about 85 percent of the population. As IDF chief Lt. Gen. Eyal Zamir said on December 7: “The Yellow Line is a new border line, serving as a forward defensive line for our communities and a line of operational activity.”<sup>6</sup> No practical plans have been drawn for an outside force—whether the UN-endorsed International Stabilization Force or some other armed body—to enter the Hamas-controlled area to forcibly disarm the group’s remnants, which include some 20,000 fighters. And neither of the two other possibilities—Israeli troops and Palestinian police—is a serious option to disarm Hamas, at least in the near term.<sup>7</sup>

Israel itself is likely to limit its Gaza activities to defending its zone of control and preventing illicit Hamas resupply efforts and hit-and-run attacks. Launching a major operation soon to disarm the group would appear unlikely for at least three reasons:

- Israel is reluctant to take action that would indicate the collapse of President Trump’s signal achievement.
- Such an action would require the deployment of large numbers of reservists, fewer of whom are already showing up for duty,<sup>8</sup> narrowing the pool of personnel available for renewed operations and further exacerbating the political outcry over Haredi conscription.
- After two years of inconclusive warfare, it is not clear Israel can conclusively accomplish a task so severely complicated by Hamas’s strategy of embedding itself among civilians, which would again draw international opprobrium in response to the high civilian casualties and tremendous damage likely to be caused by a return to full-scale military operations.

As for Palestinian police, training a force capable of achieving this task is woefully behind schedule, and even if such a force existed, Israel has long opposed its deployment (see Netanyahu’s fifth war aim). In this environment, terms of the United Nations–approved 20-point plan calling for a Board of Peace and Palestinian transitional administration in Gaza may be implemented, but it is decidedly unclear whether those institutions will exert much influence in Hamas’s zone of control.

Outside the government’s stated war aims, Israel did register additional achievements. These include:

- **Maintaining remarkable unity of purpose**, despite the deep political divide that has strained Israel’s social and national cohesion
- **The impressive shouldering by civil society of heavy responsibility for victims, families, and internally displaced persons** when, in the aftermath of October 7, the national government foundered in stunned indecision
- **The decision by the vast majority of Israel’s Arab citizens not to join Hamas’s call to open a home front of the war**, thereby effectively throwing in their lot with their Jewish neighbors
- **The response by West Bank Palestinians**, who generally sat out the conflict despite encouragement by Hamas leader Yahya al-Sinwar to launch a third intifada, polling data that showed substantial support there for Hamas, and frequent provocations by violent settlers often with the passive support of Israeli authorities<sup>9</sup>

In addition, on the international front, Israel can count among its successes:

- **The ability to sequence its conflicts with regional adversaries**, made possible through U.S. military and diplomatic support, thus preventing Iran and its proxies from realizing the full potential of their “ring of fire” to overwhelm Israeli defenses



- **The fact that none of Israel's five Arab peace partners—Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco—suspended their treaties or broke relations** during the war, despite global condemnation of the impact of Israeli military actions on Palestinian civilians
- **The retention by Israel, despite periodic strains, of the support and partnership of its most important ally, the United States**, under two administrations of very different political persuasions
- **Securing the UN-endorsed 20-point ceasefire plan**, which includes numerous terms that advance Israeli strategic interests, beginning with point 1: “Gaza will be a deradicalized terror-free zone that does not pose a threat to its neighbors.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet each of these achievements also has its darker side. On the domestic front, areas of concern include the unprecedented societal stress in Israel evidenced by the massive weekly protests against government policy, the rise in absenteeism among army reservists, and the near-breaking point within the West Bank which could lead to an explosion that would surprise no one. On the international front, discouraging trends include the deepening frigidity of ties with all Arab peace partners, the popular association of Israel's actions in Gaza with “genocide,” and a widespread rise in often-violent antisemitism. The United States, whose support is essential for Israel's security, has seen a swift decline in backing for Israel among key elements of both political parties and the emergence of Israel-related policy questions—especially regarding assistance and arms sales—as a wedge issue on right and left. And in terms of the ceasefire, which is rightly lauded for facilitating the release of hostages, the absence of any implementation mechanism for the “process of demilitarization” outlined in point 13 could render the entire exercise stillborn. On all these issues, it is far too early to offer a net assessment of which trends unleashed on that fateful Saturday in October—positive or negative—is likely to have the longest-lasting and most consequential implications.

## Hamas: A Litany of Successes

Hamas's achievements in the war are perhaps harder to assess than Israel's because of the terrorist group's very different relationship to Gaza's civilian population than the Israeli government's relationship to its citizens. There is little evidence that Hamas considered the welfare of ordinary Palestinians in its decision to launch the October 7 assault or in how it waged the subsequent war. Indeed, maximizing Palestinian civilian casualties—especially children and women—seems to have been part of Hamas's perverse diplomatic, political, and informational strategy against Israel. (None of this, one should note, relieved Israel of its own requirements to operate according to legal and moral norms throughout the war.)

Assessing the outcome of the war for Hamas, therefore, is limited to evaluating the organization's own achievements, not the broader societal impact in Gaza to which Hamas appeared largely indifferent. Disputes over the precise statistics notwithstanding, there is little disagreement that the war killed or injured more than 5 percent of Gaza's prewar population, damaged or destroyed more than 80 percent of its physical structures, and caused pervasive misery across the civilian population.<sup>11</sup>

Despite this unfathomable human toll, from Hamas's organizational perspective, the scorecard looks relatively bright. Its achievements include:

- **Survival.** Hamas suffered losses—in its leadership, commanders, and foot soldiers—that decimated its ranks and forced it to recruit teenage boys to fill the gaps. Deaths at the senior level include October 7 mastermind Yahya al-Sinwar and virtually all his close comrades. Yet, as both a military force and a governing body, Hamas survived two years of fighting against a fully mobilized Israeli army that sent up to six divisions into the tight area of Gaza. Moreover, Palestinians, Arabs, and other regional players—including some whose armed forces previously buckled under

Israeli might in days or weeks—witnessed this display of steadfastness (*sumud*) and took notice.

- **Territorial control.** Hamas started the war in full control of the Gaza Strip. More than two years after Israel launched a ferocious counterattack—for which it identified a key objective as denying Hamas the ability to govern or operate as a coherent military force—Hamas still holds effective control of nearly half of Gaza.
- **Lingering impact of surprise.** More than two years after Hamas's assault, Israel's political class, national security establishment, and the broader public are still grappling with the implications of that shock. To have upended Israel's conventional thinking about security priorities and moved the Hamas challenge from the margins to the center of Israeli strategic concerns constitutes a major achievement. The staying power of the Hamas challenge is apparent in its continued domination of Israel's politics and psyche and is symbolized by the lack of national consensus on whether and how to conduct an official state inquiry into the events of October 7.
- **UN and other international support.** While Hamas should not expect foreign donors to support any major reconstruction efforts in its zone of control, it does benefit from UN and other aid agencies that provide services for the population. Such humanitarian aid addresses the basic needs of Gazans and thereby facilitates Hamas's control by relieving it of the burden of doing so itself.
- **Enhanced international recognition.** In addition to enjoying offices in major U.S. non-NATO ally Qatar and freedom to operate in NATO-member Turkey, Hamas leaders have now met in person with senior U.S. officials, including President Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff. Despite ceasefire terms that relegate Hamas to political oblivion, the group's leaders can reasonably conclude from these contacts that they are now recognized players whose interests will be considered in any future diplomacy.
- **Global sympathy for Palestinian statehood and Hamas.** Hamas may oppose any permanent peace based on recognizing Israel, but it is happy to claim credit for unleashing the wave of global sympathy for Palestinian statehood—both among governments and broader public opinion—that surged during the Gaza war. Amazingly, despite the horror of its October 7 assault on innocent civilians, Hamas itself—not just the Palestinian national cause—managed to earn support from large numbers of journalists, intellectuals, students, and public figures in Western countries.<sup>12</sup>
- **Global outrage at Israel and Zionism.** At the same time, Hamas can take comfort in Israel's loss of considerable political and popular support over the two years of war, including within key U.S. constituencies. Importantly, this loss of support extends well beyond criticism of Israel's current government to condemnation of the state and delegitimization of its ideological rationale, Zionism.
- **Empowerment of patrons.** Longtime Hamas patrons Turkey and Qatar have emerged as major players in postwar diplomacy—and as close partners of President Trump—and are sure to keep in mind Hamas's interests in discussions with the United States and other actors.
- **Derailing Saudi normalization with Israel.** If, as was widely reported, one of the principal rationales for the October 7 assault was to prevent an imminent breakthrough to Israel-Saudi normalization, Hamas appears to have succeeded. A prime takeaway of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's November 2025 visit to Washington is that improvement in the U.S.-Saudi relationship has been delinked from the trilateral U.S.-Saudi-Israel relationship, with the kingdom achieving most of its bilateral objectives without any connection to normalization with Israel.

These nine achievements are significant. A potential additional achievement is the opening of a path toward Hamas legitimacy within the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) framework. This could

come as a result of snowballing enthusiasm—by Egypt and perhaps other key actors—to solve the disarmament conundrum by applying what some call the “Sinn Fein” model to Hamas, whereby the group would accept the decommissioning of certain weaponry in exchange for full integration within the PLO infrastructure and the broader Palestinian national movement.<sup>13</sup> While superficially appealing because it would obviate the need for an armed showdown, this path could eventually allow Hamas either to take over the PLO or become the Palestinian Authority’s local Hezbollah equivalent—the nonstate force that dominates and has veto power over the state. To be sure, negotiations over internal Palestinian “reconciliation” have sputtered for years, but this option has for the first time garnered intense international interest, given the apparent lack of other non-coercive ways to progress toward Hamas disarmament.

Hamas, to be sure, has suffered strategic and political losses alongside these significant achievements. At the broadest level, Hamas failed to ignite several fronts to achieve the hoped-for stranglehold on Israel, especially in the West Bank and among Israel’s Arab citizens, and received only grudging practical support—at least in the early days—from Hezbollah and Iran. While the war eventually spread to these fronts, Hamas bore the brunt of the IDF’s might in the period after October 7. On the inter-Arab level, Hamas suffered political loss in the form of pan-Arab governmental support for the French-Saudi plan on Palestinian statehood, which includes both a clear condemnation of Hamas’s October 7 attack and an unambiguous call for Hamas to give up its weapons and forswear any role in Gaza’s postwar government.<sup>14</sup> That said, these statements are at best aspirational, and none of the plan’s signatories has offered to do the hard work of forcibly disarming Hamas. Moreover, Hamas does appear to have retained a voice in the selection of members of the proposed transitional administration, suggesting that it remains an accepted player in defining the postwar architecture despite these diplomatic condemnations.

Since the ceasefire, the list of Hamas achievements continues to grow. For example, Hamas has suffered

no serious repercussions for the slow pace of returning the remains of dead hostages. And the equally slow pace of forming the Board of Peace and the Palestinian transitional administration has allowed Hamas to prove to Gazans that it can still govern and quash dissent within its area of control.

Plans are reportedly underway to gradually erode Hamas’s control of its zone by building, in the Israeli zone, “alternative safe communities” with model residential facilities and full health, welfare, and educational services.<sup>15</sup> The theory of the case is that these communities would attract Palestinians to reject Hamas governance, vote with their feet, and cross the boundary line. While this initiative may entice a certain number of Palestinians to relocate, it is difficult to see either how it achieves a critical mass of Palestinian migrants or how this movement will undermine Hamas’s control. Indeed, Hamas itself is not certain to oppose a plan that shrinks the number of civilians in its zone. If this costly effort does not succeed in whittling away Hamas’s control of its portion of Gaza, it will count as yet another Hamas achievement.

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## Rethinking the Ceasefire

If this assessment three months after the ceasefire announcement is accurate, it is appropriate to rethink the process that led to that event.

Conventional wisdom holds that the Trump administration achieved its ceasefire breakthrough by combining the president’s desire for a history-making agreement with his outrage at Israel’s abortive attack on Hamas leaders in a Doha suburb, then channeling them into two tracks: The first was an effort to marshal the influence of three key Muslim states—Turkey and Qatar plus Egypt, Gaza’s sole Arab outlet to the world—to compel Hamas to accept the deal, while the second included pressure on an otherwise friendless Israel to accept it. While the Israel part of the equation appears accurate, the long list of Hamas achievements in the ceasefire suggests that the group did not really need to be compelled into acceptance.

In retrospect, it is just as likely that Hamas and its patrons recognized that the hostages had by September 2025 become a wasting asset. While holding them during the war may have deterred the IDF from launching certain types of military operations—Israeli ground forces did not enter the vicinity of Deir al-Balah until July 2025, apparently for just that reason—Hamas and its allies may well have realized that a point had been reached whereby the benefits of releasing them far outweighed the benefits of keeping them. In other words, the notion that Turkey, Qatar, and Egypt had to twist Hamas’s arm to secure acquiescence to the ceasefire may be wrong. Indeed, if one follows the basic principle of “cui bono?”—who benefits?—Hamas may have wanted (and, with its patrons, perhaps even engineered) the ceasefire to reap its windfall of achievements.

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## A War Without Losers

So far, both Israel and Hamas have secured important benefits from the ceasefire—for Israel, the release of hostages and the creation of a substantial buffer zone within Gaza to prevent future attacks; for Hamas, a long list ranging from open-ended control over nearly half of Gaza to the elevation of its regional patrons, Turkey and Qatar, to positions of unprecedented influence with the U.S. administration.

Declaring a “winner” depends on how each side values and prioritizes its achievements. If the only test of victory is whether Hamas survived the war that it launched on October 7, 2023—and if one is doing the evaluation today—then Hamas won. But for national, ideological, communal, and humanitarian reasons, a decision by Israel to prioritize the release of hostages may have been sufficient to agree to a ceasefire with at best uncertain implementation procedures. In other words, the answer to “who won the war” depends on the yardstick each uses to define victory. The answer can legitimately be both. What is clear, however, is that while the Palestinian people in Gaza suffered horrific losses, Hamas itself did not lose—certainly, at least, not yet.

Still another strong possibility must be considered: that the ceasefire does not mark the end of the Hamas-Israel war. While the status quo could last a significant period—perhaps through the Israeli election and the formation of a new government, whether under current or new leadership—it is subject to pressures from multiple sides and is fundamentally unstable. President Trump may grow weary, restless, and angry with his signature agreement in suspended animation. Arab and Muslim governments, especially those that played a role in securing the ceasefire, may not want to serve as handmaidens to long-term Israeli military control over half of Gaza. And with the passage of time—during which Hamas can be expected to periodically probe Israel’s control of the boundary line and test Israel’s ability to prevent illicit resupply—Israeli elite and public opinion may begin to shift away from satisfaction at securing the hostages’ release and turn to the affront of the unfinished business from October 7. Indeed, the coming election campaign itself may bring to the fore frustration at Hamas’s survival as a force that both governs and fights.

Indeed, all three pressures—Trump’s restlessness, the guarantors’ impatience, the Israelis’ unease at Hamas’s survival—have the potential to develop. In this light, a dramatic change from the status quo—from a return to full-scale IDF military operations against Hamas to some new form of Hamas surprise against Israel, perhaps drawing on rising sympathy among pockets of Israel’s Arab community and West Bank Palestinians—cannot be ruled out.<sup>16</sup>

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## Variables That Could Tilt the Balance

As of this writing, the body of just one fallen Israeli is left to be repatriated, and President Trump appears poised to announce the transition to “phase two” of the ceasefire. This would involve the formal establishment of the Board of Peace, the creation of the Palestinian-led Gaza transitional administration, the organization of an International Stabilization

Force, and the beginning of a massive project of rubble and ordnance removal, reconstruction, and rehabilitation. These hopeful initiatives, however, will immediately crash into the reality of a Gaza divided between Israeli and Hamas zones of control, without any agreed path toward disarmament/demilitarization. As Hamas leader Khaled Mashal said at a Muslim Brotherhood conference in Istanbul in early December: “A core tenet of the Hamas vision is the absolute protection of the resistance movement and its weapons.”<sup>17</sup> Chances that Hamas will voluntarily disarm are virtually nil, though perhaps the group will attempt the theatrics of handing over some pieces of weaponry—a Qassam rocket or two—that Turkey and Qatar might trumpet as a sign of goodwill. Yet despite the best efforts of Ankara and Doha to market this as a “win,” their arguments are bound to fall flat, not least because Hamas will inevitably parade through Gaza’s cities, towns, and camps with weapons in hand. The most likely result, therefore, is the hardening of the division of Gaza into its current two zones, with Hamas maintaining its stranglehold on the region along the Mediterranean coast with the lion’s share of the Gaza civilian population.

Looking over the next several months, a number of factors could shake up this situation. Here are four:

- Israel’s de facto “war of attrition,” implied by General Zamir’s remarks about the Yellow Line, could chip away at Hamas’s control and open opportunities either for more aggressive Israeli tactics, a rethinking by Hamas of how to compensate for growing vulnerability, or more assertiveness by Palestinians within the Hamas zone chafing at the group’s control. The last possibility might be fed by the imagery of rapid quality-of-life improvements for the relatively small percentage of Palestinians living inside the Israeli zone, though one should be wary of the idea that comparative deprivation or “fear of missing out” will trigger mass uprising. A key variable here is whether the partial or symbolic “decommissioning” of Hamas weaponry earns the beleaguered group any political benefits, a slippery slope toward undermining the core principle outlined in paragraph thirteen of the 20-point plan: that

Hamas will “not have any role in the governance of Gaza, directly, indirectly, or in any form.”

- Key guarantors of the Gaza ceasefire—notably, Turkey and Qatar, perhaps with Egypt—may grow impatient with blessing a process that, in the absence of Hamas disarmament, effectively affirms direct, long-term Israeli control of more than half of Gaza. As a result, they might appeal to Trump to pressure Israel to withdraw from Gaza, or at least pull back from the Yellow Line, and move on to the latter stages of the 20-point plan, even with a diminished Hamas still controlling nearly half the territory. While Trump is unlikely to renounce the terms of his own peace plan and turn on Israel, he will also want to avoid a situation in which Turkey and Qatar threaten to resign as guarantors, forcing him to choose between them and Israel. In that situation, Israel’s leadership may feel pressured to accept diluted peace terms in order to keep the relationship with Trump intact.
- A different Israeli approach to the role of the Palestinian Authority would open a range of new opportunities. Currently, the Israeli government publicly disparages the PA, has insisted the PA have nothing to do with ceasefire implementation, and has kept open only a highly conditional, highly theoretical option for a “reformed” PA to participate much later in the process. (In this regard, the current Israeli government does not like to advertise that it quietly set a precedent for PA participation in Gaza by allowing it a presence at the Rafah crossing.<sup>18</sup>) Although the PA is not currently up to the task of either extending its flawed governance to Gaza or dispatching PA security forces there, removing even the option of Palestinian security deployment cuts off a key avenue for any non-Israeli military effort to disarm Hamas. Accordingly, if Israel were to approve the idea of an urgent, large-scale, internationally funded training effort for Palestinian security forces to prepare for deployment to Gaza in support of the Palestinian transitional administration, the news itself would likely have a positive impact. Indeed, such a shift in Israel’s approach—which could



be conditioned on PA agreement not to provide Hamas the political life preserver of joining the Palestinian national movement—might alter both Hamas’s internal debate on disarmament and the willingness of reluctant actors, like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to play a larger role in Gaza’s reconstruction and rehabilitation. Israeli domestic political considerations notwithstanding, a push by President Trump to urge Israel to embrace the option of a PA role in Gaza—starting with security forces—may be one way to avert a showdown between Israel and Hamas-friendly guarantors Turkey and Qatar.

- Alternatively, with Knesset elections drawing near, the prospect of Hamas maintaining its hold on nearly half of Gaza may convince Israel’s leadership to take a very different direction—to chuck the restraints of the 20-point plan and launch renewed large-scale ground and air operations to “finish the job.” That Hamas will provide some justification for Israeli military action—by failing to disarm, attempting to rearm, or launching an attack across the Yellow Line or a drone or rocket strike into Israel—is a certainty. The key issues here are whether Israel has built up enough goodwill with Washington that President Trump

acquiesces in the regrettable collapse of the ceasefire or whether Netanyahu is willing to buck the president to serve what for him may be a more urgent purpose—pursuing bold action that may earn him the support of wavering center-right voters. Of course, a return to large-scale military operations would reopen the same fundamental question that has dogged Israel since October 7—about the ability of the IDF, or any army, for that matter, to destroy through solely military means a terrorist organization-cum-government as deeply embedded in territory and society as Hamas. While the answer is probably yes, the task would exact a substantial human, economic, and political toll spread over a period likely measured in months or even years, certainly not weeks—a timeframe for which the Trump administration is unlikely to have patience.

In sum, numerous decisions need to be made by key actors—especially Israel, Hamas, and the ceasefire guarantors—that will shape the next phase of the Gaza conflict. The very fact of a “next phase” has its own implications. One is that, notwithstanding the value of analyzing the achievements of the combatants since October 7, it is too early to definitively answer the question “who won the Hamas-Israel war.”

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