

The Hamas-Israel War: End of the Beginning or Beginning of the End?

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Experts discuss the military and political situation at what appears to be a decisive moment in the war, offering insights on Israel's calculations, the effects of growing foreign pressure, and the need for further international action to address attacks by Iran's other regional partners.

On December 14, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Brig. Gen. Assaf Orion (Israel Defense Forces, Res.), Hanin Ghaddar, and Matthew Levitt, moderated by Robert Satloff. Orion is the Institute's Rueven International Fellow and former head of the IDF Strategic Planning Division. Ghaddar is the Institute's Friedmann Senior Fellow and co-creator of its [interactive map](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mapping-clashes-along-israel-lebanon-border) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mapping-clashes-along-israel-lebanon-border>) tracking clashes along the Israel-Lebanon border. Levitt is the Institute's Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of its Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. Satloff is the Institute's Segal Executive Director and Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Assaf Orion

Two months into the war, Israel is more or less progressing toward its objectives of degrading Hamas's military capabilities and freeing hostages. That said, it will need many more months to achieve its long-term goal of eliminating Hamas's ability to control Gaza and threaten Israel.

Previous phases of the war focused on securing the southern border and uprooting Hamas's command and control in urban north Gaza—a battlefield that Hamas purposely chose so that it could use the dense population as cover. Following a humanitarian pause and the release of 113 hostages, Israel has moved into its current, more intense phase, expanding operations into south Gaza in order to weaken Hamas's military capabilities and target its leadership.

The IDF estimates that over 7,000 Hamas fighters have been killed so far, including several commanders. Most Hamas units that have engaged directly with the IDF are no longer able to operate as cohesive units.

Over the next few weeks, Israel expects to continue the current intensive phase in the south in parallel with renewed diplomatic and military efforts to rescue the remaining 135 hostages. Yet the end of this phase will not necessarily signal the end of the war. Eliminating Hamas's ability to threaten Israel is an ambitious goal that will likely require additional months of lower-intensity, smaller-scale operations.

The war's longer timeline also holds implications for Israeli domestic politics. The atmosphere of national unity post-October 7 has largely distracted the public from controversies such as the mass protests over judicial reform, allowing the government to postpone domestic tensions during the war. The longer the Gaza conflict continues, the more time the government will have to avoid these difficult political questions.

Another complication is the disparity between the war's overarching purpose and the public expectations of its scope and duration—not just internationally, but within Israel as well. These expectations are conditioned by previous experiences in shorter Israeli wars. Yet the current conflict is fundamentally different in its aims and domestic context, so observers at home and abroad should compare it to longer-term campaigns when evaluating its progress.

The war must also be understood in its multifront, regional context. To the north, Hezbollah has been attacking Israel's border [multiple times per day](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mapping-clashes-along-israel-lebanon-border) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mapping-clashes-along-israel-lebanon-border>). To the south, Yemen's Houthis [have launched](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/heir-and-spare-how-how-yemens-southern-hezbollah-could-change-irans-deterrent) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/heir-and-spare-how-how-yemens-southern-hezbollah-could-change-irans-deterrent>) numerous ballistic and cruise missiles in Israel's direction and [attacked shipping lanes](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-ship-attacks-are-affecting-red-sea-trade-routes) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-ship-attacks-are-affecting-red-sea-trade-routes>) in the Red Sea. These actions have international implications and thus require broad multilateral solutions. It is not up to Israel alone to eliminate the threat of Iranian proxies in the region.

Matthew Levitt

The October 7 attack proved to Israel that deterrence alone cannot guarantee its security. The strategy of "conflict management" failed to contain Hamas, and Israelis have decided that the era of living with a gun to their head is over. The repercussions of this transformed national security doctrine extend to the northern border as well, lowering Israel's tolerance for the threat posed by Hezbollah's looming military presence.

In the near term, the government is determined to remove any Hezbollah fighters and weapons within eight to ten kilometers of the Blue Line so that evacuated Israeli civilians can return home safely, free from the risk of being attacked or kidnapped by Hezbollah's elite Radwan forces or targeted by Kornet antitank guided missiles. In the longer term—within the next one to five years—officials fear they may need to launch a campaign to neutralize the threat of Hezbollah's precision-guided missiles, which are capable of striking targets throughout Israel.

For Hamas, the decision to attack was apparently based on several costly miscalculations. First, the group did not expect such a high degree of U.S. involvement and support, including the deployment of two carrier groups into the region; to the contrary, it expected Washington to rein in Israel's response. Second, Hamas wrongly assumed that Iran and its regional proxies would intervene militarily, preventing Israel from committing to a ground invasion. Third, the group hoped that Palestinians in the West Bank and Arab Israelis would rise up, which has largely [not come to pass](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/why-west-bank-front-has-not-opened-so-far) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/why-west-bank-front-has-not-opened-so-far>). These miscalculations have begun to foster disagreement between Hamas leaders as they consider next steps.

In Israel, current perceptions of the war differ sharply from international views, largely because the population is still dealing with the national trauma of October 7. In their view, this war was forced on Israel by the savagery of an assault that shattered its deterrence concept and left it with no choice but to dismantle the Hamas governance project in Gaza. Israelis are upset about the suffering of noncombatant Palestinians, but they are also frustrated that

the international community has harshly criticized them and imposed a ticking clock. The IDF is taking steps to minimize civilian casualties, and these steps have necessarily slowed its military operations.

Ultimately, Israelis are more focused on freeing hostages and defeating Hamas than winning hearts and minds abroad, while the military is intent on restoring the public's sense of security and returning evacuated civilians to their homes. Yet because many officials remain consumed with the day-to-day operations of the war, the political leadership has yet to decide what comes next in Gaza after Hamas. In this sense there is a clear disconnect with the military leadership, as politics are preventing officials from presenting a clear vision for the future of the Strip.

Hanin Ghaddar

The recent escalation on the Israel-Lebanon border has three potential outcomes: a local military conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, a regional military conflict with the wider Iran threat network, or a diplomatic solution that precludes the need for a military response. The latter option would hinge on reinstituting UN Security Council Resolution 1701, especially the provisions that call on Hezbollah to withdraw any presence it has south of the Litani River.

Although Resolution 1701 looks good on paper, it has not worked on the ground because it was formulated as a border-control and risk-mitigation arrangement. In other words, it completely ignores Hezbollah's other problematic activities, not to mention Iran's destabilizing role throughout the Middle East. Hezbollah essentially operates as a unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—whenever the group needs to make important security decisions, Tehran calls the shots. Hence, any diplomatic solution that ignores Iran's overriding influence will inevitably fail to affect Hezbollah's activities.

Resolution 1701 has fundamental enforcement problems as well. There is no body capable of enforcing its terms—the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has failed to prevent Hezbollah from infiltrating the south, while the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) have been unable to control the group's activities. Even if Hezbollah agreed to respect the terms of a deal based on 1701, it has a long history of asking other armed groups to carry out provocations on the border, providing it with plausible deniability.

Despite its recent stream of threatening comments, however, Hezbollah does not want a full-scale war with Israel at this time. Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's **statements make clear** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-did-nasrallah-really-say-and-why>) that the group intends to stop its cross-border attacks once Israel stops its intensive military operations inside Gaza.

In the longer term, the outcome of the Hamas war will influence Hezbollah's future actions. If Hamas is able to retain even some of its capabilities in Gaza and convincingly declare "victory," Nasrallah might conclude that attacking Israel is worth the costs. Even in that scenario, however, Hezbollah is unlikely to carry out a large-scale attack anytime soon. More likely, it will use diplomacy to stall for time and rebuild the capabilities it has lost during the current border conflict. Hezbollah leaders understand that Israel is intent on changing the post-2006 status quo, so they will likely prioritize beefing up their forces for a future war.

Robert Satloff

Recent media coverage of the crisis has focused on President Biden's statements criticizing the Israeli government, speculating on the implications this might hold for the bilateral relationship. Yet headlines claiming that a significant rift has formed do not capture the entirety of Biden's remarks, which clearly articulate his deep and abiding support for what he perceives to be Israel's just war against Hamas.

The president's critique focused on the composition of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's cabinet, especially the extreme members who are not part of the war cabinet. Moreover, his remarks were delivered in response to Netanyahu's previous public disagreement with him on aspects of postwar planning. Ultimately, it is in both leaders' interests to keep these disagreements out of the public eye for the sake of presenting a united wartime alliance, especially amid growing global pressure to impose a ceasefire. Both Israel and the United States reject this option because it would prevent Israel from achieving its war aims and allow Hamas to remain in control of Gaza, thereby undermining the possibility of any meaningful postwar peace diplomacy.

This summary was prepared by Frances McDonough and Ilana Winter. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ♦

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