

Will Israel Find the Right Type of “Victory” in Gaza?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Officials are having to balance military realities, allied concerns, domestic public sentiment, and the calculations of Hamas, whose own leaders are fine with certain kinds of “defeat” so long as they can still influence Gaza.

With the war in Gaza still raging, both Israel and Hamas are striving to reach the final stage and declare victory. While things may of course look different when the guns fall silent, and certainly in another ten years, six months have already passed since the October 7 attack, so now is a good time to examine how Israel and Hamas perceive victory, and what each side requires to achieve systemic victory.

Israel’s Concept of Victory

Victory (or “decision”) is one of the four foundations of Israel’s national security doctrine, alongside deterrence, early warning, and defense. The doctrine distinguishes between four types of victory (<https://besacenter.org/what-would-total-victory-mean-in-gaza/>):

1. **Tactical victory:** negating the enemy’s combat capabilities
2. **Operational victory:** dismantling the enemy’s fighting system through a series of engagements or battles
3. **Strategic-military victory:** removing the military threat for years to come
4. **Systemic victory:** fundamentally changing the strategic situation politically, militarily, and economically

Israel’s military actions in the Gaza Strip show that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have achieved tactical and operational victory over Hamas—that is, taking control of the group’s “living space” and denying it the ability to fight in Gaza as a formal military entity or to maintain an organized command-and-control system on the ground or underground.

The IDF would achieve “strategic-military victory” by denying Hamas its rocket, tunnel, weapons manufacturing,

and smuggling capabilities and dramatically reducing the threat to the Israeli home front to the level of isolated incidents. This is a lengthy process that will come after operational victory through a series of military operations that effectively prevent Hamas's military rehabilitation.

Ultimately, however, Israel aspires to achieve systemic victory, a fundamental change in its strategic situation, by removing the threat Hamas poses to Israeli civilians. Systemic victory will not be achieved solely through military means; it also requires political, civilian, and economic actions that will gradually lead to a change in the logic behind Hamas's actions and reduce the motivation of the local populace to continue supporting it. Israel currently faces two issues that illustrate the differences between a strategic-military victory and a systemic victory, showing why the military tool cannot be the only tool used to effect change:

The survival of the Hamas leadership: The group has already lost a number of senior figures and is expected to also lose key military and political operatives. This would affect its ability to conduct an efficient and organized military struggle against Israel in various arenas. Officials such as Ismail Haniyeh and Khaled Mashal are political leaders who will not be able to rebuild the military infrastructure in Gaza, and establishing a new generation of military leaders will take time. Still, in order to preserve Israel's military achievement, an alternative political leadership in Gaza must emerge quickly to bring about the necessary governmental change.

The ground operation in Rafah and control of the Philadelphia Corridor smuggling route: Israel sees Rafah as the last Hamas military stronghold since the group's battalions are still operating there as organized military units. It also views the Philadelphia Corridor as the movement's lifeline, which could help it recover militarily in the future.

So far, Israel's determination to act in Rafah has been met with widespread opposition from various actors, led by the United States. They are demanding that Israel allow refugees to return to northern Gaza, though Israel intends to relocate the Palestinian population to the Mawasi area northwest of Rafah for security reasons. Egypt has warned that it will suspend its peace treaty with Israel if evacuees move into its territory following Israel's military operation; Jordan's response to a Rafah ground operation will likely be unfavorable as well. The key question for Israel is whether a strategic victory in the conquest of Rafah is worth the price it may pay in a collision with the United States and its Arab peace partners.

Hamas: Survival as the Key to Victory

So far, it is unclear what Hamas leader Yahya al-Sinwar hoped to achieve with the October 7 attack and how he envisions the war's endgame. However, unlike Israel, which views victory as having several elements, Hamas, as a resistance movement, focuses on one element only: survival. In this context, it does not view Israel's objective—transforming Hamas from a sovereign entity to a collection of terrorist cells—as defeat. This is because maintaining sovereignty is not an end in itself for Hamas, but rather a means to facilitate “resistance” against Israel and solidify public support.

In Sinwar's view, victory is not measured by territory conquered, infrastructure destroyed, or casualties inflicted, but by the group's ability to rebuild its military and civilian infrastructure, manage resistance and public opinion, and, most important, wield influence over postwar governance in Gaza. Since he believes that victory is assured as long as the movement survives, he is conducting tough negotiations with Israel on the hostages, including demands for U.S. guarantees of a permanent ceasefire and Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

When Sinwar looks at Hamas's overall management of the war at this stage, he likely sees a mixed picture, but one leaning toward the positive. Hamas has brought the Palestinian issue to center stage in the region and internationally, exposed Israel's vulnerabilities, damaged its deterrent power, and halted its normalization with Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, the group enjoys widespread support in Palestinian public opinion. Yet Hamas has not succeeded in its objective of rallying the “axis of resistance,” Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem, and Arab

Israelis to open multiple fronts against Israel—which was the organizing principle of the current war.

Conclusion

Israel needs a systemic victory, a long and sustained process that will fundamentally change the reality in Gaza. This will be possible if Israel promotes military actions that weaken Hamas and simultaneously lays the groundwork for establishing an alternative civil security force to enforce law and order in Gaza and address terrorist threats. For a true systemic victory, Israel will need to reduce opposition—primarily from the United States—to the actions needed to achieve this goal.

Yet Israeli officials must also remove the obstacles they have themselves placed to reestablishing the Palestinian Authority in Gaza in a revised format. This will avoid the need for Israel to become the civilian authority there while providing it with military leeway to continue weakening Hamas over time. Moreover, such a shift would likely rally the United States and moderate Arab states to form a coalition to achieve further military gains (e.g., closing the smuggling routes to the PA) and political gains (e.g., promoting normalization with Saudi Arabia; forming a coalition against Iran and its proxies).

Simultaneously, Israel should demonstrate greater wisdom in advancing a sustained humanitarian effort in Gaza, opening crossings besides Kerem Shalom, returning refugees to northern Gaza, and addressing rehabilitation. The humanitarian issue has become a strategic minefield for Israel that could lead to a complete loss of international and regional support. The incident this week in which seven employees of the World Central Kitchen were killed in an IDF attack indicates more than anything why Israel needs to [change its positions](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/imminent-avoidable-us-israel-rift-over-gaza) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/imminent-avoidable-us-israel-rift-over-gaza>) on humanitarian issues.

Another major part of the systemic victory picture is public sentiment in Israel, toward the hostage issue in particular. The situation is currently unclear, and resolving this difficult problem will likely create some feelings of loss, pain, and failure, partly because of the price Israel may have to pay in releasing prominent Palestinian prisoners. Yet it is quite clear that until the hostages—living and dead—are returned, the Israeli public will not be able to speak of victory, regardless of Israel's significant military achievements.

Neomi Neumann is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute and former head of the research unit at the Israel Security Agency. ♦

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