THE STATE OF HAMAS IN GAZA AFTER OCTOBER 7

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Nearly two years after October 7, the Israeli government is still arguing that a key war aim is to eliminate Hamas in Gaza, without a clear strategy for doing so. This paper takes stock of where Hamas stands today in terms of military, financial, governance, and leadership capabilities and analyzes the prospects for displacing Hamas in Gaza after the war.

Hamas's Military Capabilities in Gaza

Israel has severely degraded Hamas's military capabilities, but the group has managed to transition from a paramilitary organization to a guerrilla force. Prior to the war, the Al-Qassam military wing of Hamas comprised approximately 30,000 militants, organized into five brigades and 24 battalions, operating in all five governorates of the Gaza Strip. The IDF claims to have killed up to 23,000 of these militants and that it dismantled 20 Hamas battalions.

The Israeli military also claims to have conquered about 75 percent of Gaza, while Hamas retains control of about 25 percent – mainly in the central Gaza area of Deir al-Balah. Despite these heavy losses, Hamas has reportedly recruited as many as 30,000 new fighters from among the estimated two million Gazans who have been evacuated to the area under its control. However, these recruits are largely untrained, and their resources have been drained by the war.

Israel has also killed many Hamas military leaders, thereby disrupting the group's chain of command. Absent a cohesive leadership structure, Hamas has been forced to operate as a loosely organized group of militant cells. The group has shifted to decentralized guerrilla warfare, mounting deadly "hit-and-run" attacks against Israeli forces in Gaza. Hamas now possesses just 10-15% of its prewar arsenal of 20,000 projectiles, such that the group can only launch rockets sporadically with almost no impact. Instead, Hamas relies upon what remains of its underground tunnel network to ambush IDF troops using improvised explosive devices often made of recovered Israeli munitions.

Retired Maj. Gen Israel Ziv, former head of the IDF's Operations Directorate, has called Hamas's latest insurgency campaign a "war of IEDs" that is "built around our weaknesses. They don't defend territory – they seek targets," turning the ruins of Gaza into their advantage and exploiting Israel's vulnerabilities. Crucially, Hamas no longer has the capability to repeat October 7, but its guerrilla tactics have rendered Israel's goal of destroying Hamas even more elusive.

Hamas's Financial Crisis in Gaza

Hamas is nearing bankruptcy and facing a severe financial crisis in the Gaza Strip. Wartime conditions and Israeli restrictions on cash infusions have made it difficult for Hamas to distribute funds, such that many senior officials are receiving only half of their salaries. Rank-and-file militants have been earning monthly wages averaging just $200-$300 and government

employees are not being paid at all. This financial crisis has deepened organizational dysfunction, further weakened the Gazan economy, and disrupted Hamas's recruitment efforts, all while the group contends with a more aggressive Israeli military campaign.

In early March, Israel suspended aid deliveries to Gaza, some of which Hamas had diverted for resale or distribution to its fighters. Hamas had also manipulated the flow of humanitarian aid by taxing local merchants and imposing customs on aid trucks at checkpoints. Furthermore, the group was responsible for stealing $180 million from the Bank of Palestine and other financial institutions. Before the war, the Netanyahu Government facilitated the monthly transfer of $15 million from Qatar to Hamas in exchange for quiet in Gaza. Qatar also maintained a $500 million reserve on behalf of Hamas, and the group raised additional funds overseas, much of which is now held up in Turkey. This is compounded by a post-October 7 Bank of Israel freeze on physical shekel transfers to Gaza, as well as the wartime destruction of most Gazan banks and ATMs.

Hamas's Abuses and Opposition in Gaza

Amid the Gaza war, Hamas is committing gross human rights abuses against the Palestinian population of the Strip, violating their freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly. Palestinian journalists, activists, and other civilians protesting Hamas's tyranny, corruption, and governance failures have been met with brutal repression by Hamas operatives. This includes torture, intimidation, violent harassment, and kidnappings. Hamas is actively cracking down on organized public demonstrations in which Gazan protesters chant, "out, out, Hamas out." Though access is limited, the number of Hamas victims among Palestinians in Gaza, based on the available data, is high and continues to soar. In turn, the latest public opinion polling of Palestinians in Gaza reveals a decline in support for Hamas, including a 48 percent approval rating for the anti-Hamas demonstrations.

Meanwhile, Israel has admitted to supporting Hamas rivals in Gaza, despite the criminal and terrorist affiliations of these opposition groups. Prime Minister Netanyahu reportedly authorized the arming of anti-Hamas militias without the approval of the Israeli Security Cabinet. The most prominent rival group receiving Israeli support in Gaza is the "Popular Forces" led by 35-year-old Rafah native, Yasser Abu Shabab. His criminal record includes alleged trafficking of weapons and drugs, associations with ISIS, and the looting of humanitarian aid convoys, which calls into question Netanyahu's strategy.

Hamas's Leadership Structure

IDF Assassinations

Since October 7, Israel has targeted and killed several top Hamas military and political officials in Gaza and beyond. Most notably, Israel has eliminated Hamas's chief political leader, **Ismail Haniyeh** (killed in Tehran), Hamas's leader in Gaza, **Yahya Sinwar** and his brother/heir apparent, **Mohammed Sinwar**, Hamas's leader in the West Bank **Saleh al-Arouri** (killed in

Beirut), as well as the longtime commander of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, **Mohammed Deif**. Israel also eliminated numerous other Hamas leaders, including:

- **Abu Obeida**, chief spokesperson of Al-Qassam
- **Marwan Issa**, deputy commander of Al-Qassam / second-in-command to Deif
- **Murad Abu Murad**, head of Al-Qassam air force
- **Ali Qadi**, head of the Nukhba special forces unit of Al-Qassam
- **Osama Mazini**, Hamas's chief hostage negotiator

In addition, the IDF took out the heads of all five Hamas brigades in Gaza and other senior members of Hamas's political bureau in Gaza. Crucially, all the above Hamas officials were either directly or indirectly involved in the planning, execution, and/or aftermath of the October 7, 2023 massacre in southern Israel. Yahya Sinwar was the chief architect of the massacre, and Mohammed Deif was the chief military planner, while Marwan Issa directly oversaw operational details. Collectively, these figures are considered the "three masterminds" of the Hamas terrorist attack.

Hamas Succession Plans

Hamas's entire "War Council" (Sinwar brothers, Deif, Issa, and one unnamed figure) was eliminated during the Gaza war, leaving a power vacuum in the Strip. After the killing of Yahya Sinwar in October 2024, his brother Mohammed replaced him as the leader of Hamas in Gaza. Mohammed Sinwar also led the Al-Qassam Brigades from July 2024 (after the killing of Mohammed Deif) until his death in May 2025. The killing of Yahya and his successor, Mohammed Deif, created an ongoing succession problem for Hamas in Gaza. As of May, **Izz al-Din al-Haddad**, nicknamed the "Ghost of Al-Qassam," is the incumbent leader of both Hamas in Gaza and Al-Qassam, but the future of Hamas leadership remains uncertain.

Following the assassination of Hamas's chief political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, in July 2024, Hamas formed a temporary leadership committee based in Doha (where the Hamas Political Bureau has been headquartered since relocating from Damascus in 2012). The committee decided to lead Hamas until the next leadership election, originally scheduled for March 2025 and then postponed. The five members of the temporary committee are:

1. **Khaled Mashal** – previously served as Hamas Political Bureau chairman and represents diaspora Palestinians on the committee (having lived in exile since 1967)
2. **Khalil al-Hayya** – previously served as Hamas Political Bureau deputy chairman and was Yahya Sinwar's closest political ally (acting as a bridge between Sinwar's military operations in Gaza and the Politburo in Doha)
3. **Zaher Jabarin** – leader of Hamas in the West Bank (succeeded Saleh al-Arouri) and Hamas's chief financial administrator, responsible for the Palestinian prisoner file and relations with Iran (Hamas's primary backer)
4. **Muhammad Darwish** – Chairman of the Hamas Shura Council, which elects Politburo members

5. **Nizar Awadallah** – Secretary-General of the Hamas Political Bureau

Hamas on the "Day After" the Gaza War

Given the costs of war, economic crisis, and organizational dysfunction, the role of Hamas on the "Day After" the war in Gaza remains uncertain. Following the assassination of key leaders, the group lacks a coherent plan for succession, and the status of leadership elections is unclear. Israel could also target the five members of Hamas's temporary leadership committee next, which would cause additional uncertainty. Meanwhile, Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority (PA) / Fatah in the West Bank remain starkly divided. PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas recently called Hamas "sons of dogs," condemned October 7, and demanded that Hamas release all Israeli hostages from Gaza, hand over its weapons, and end its rule of the Strip.

For his part, US President Donald Trump last week called for Hamas to be "destroyed," in line with Prime Minister Netanyahu's vague war aims. Back in March, at an emergency summit of the Arab League in Cairo, member states adopted a "Day After" plan for Gaza that includes Hamas ceding control of the Strip to the PA. The "New York Declaration" signed at the United Nations last month by all 22 Arab League states, 27 European Union states, and 17 other countries also calls for Hamas to disarm and end its rule of Gaza.

Despite this international pressure, Hamas is refusing to disarm until the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, only willing to give up ruling Gaza after the war. This positioning reveals that Hamas is likely pursuing a "Day After" arrangement similar to that of Hezbollah in Lebanon before October 7, i.e., monopolizing security while some other authority manages civilian affairs. Whereas Hezbollah had a direct arms supply channel through neighboring Syria (until the collapse of the Assad regime last year), Israel controls the Gaza border, and Hamas will therefore have much more difficulty rearming.

After two years of war, Hamas no longer resembles an army, but its counterinsurgency still poses a threat. If the Netanyahu government insists upon continued fighting against Hamas's guerrilla forces in Gaza, it will be condemning Israel to endless war and sealing the fate of Israeli hostages. Instead, Israel must adopt an integrated political, security, and reconstruction plan for the "Day After" in Gaza. Absent such a plan and determined to keep fighting, Israel will find itself in a similar position to that of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan: waging an unwinnable war with no end.