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## A military solution in Gaza is an illusion

In response to the Hamas attacks of 7 October, in which more than 1,200 Israelis, the vast majority of them civilians, were killed, more than 3,500 were wounded and more than 240 hostages were taken, the Israeli authorities launched massive bombings and a ground operation in the Gaza Strip\*. At this stage, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health, more than 11,200 people, mainly civilians, have been killed by Israeli strikes in the Palestinian enclave<sup>1</sup>. The war aims stated by the Israeli war cabinet – in particular the destruction of Hamas’s governmental and military capacities – lack realism and come up against the exorbitant human cost for the inhabitants of Gaza. At this stage, none of the options envisaged for a way out of the war manages to dispel the illusion of a military solution in Gaza.

### War goals that clash with realities on the ground

The Hamas operation, held in coordination with other armed groups in Gaza, traumatised the Israeli population by its scale and level of violence – unprecedented since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Furthermore, it shattered a series of security paradigms, starting from the aptitude of the Israeli security apparatus, with its technological superiority and powerful intelligence services, to protect its citizens. The hierarchy of threats to the State of Israel was also shaken. Following the attacks, Israel realised that the strategic issue of the Palestinian

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\*Translated from French by Ines K. T. Grange, Research Assistant, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique. See original text [here](#).

<sup>1</sup>These figures are provided by the Ministry of Health in the Gaza Strip, which is *de facto* controlled by Hamas. As with previous Israeli operations in Gaza, humanitarian agencies (UN and non-governmental organisations) and the media are unable to carry out independent checks, and are therefore relying on these provisional figures. At the end of October, Washington questioned the figures, while “not denying” that thousands of Gazans had been killed (see “Le bilan des morts dans la bande de Gaza, une controverse très politique”, [Le Monde](#), 28 October 2023).

Territories – relegated to a secondary position in the face of the Iranian threat, which has been prioritised by Israeli Prime Minister B. Netanyahu for several decades – was actually fundamental. More broadly, it is the very concept of deterrence, on which part of Israel’s defence strategy for both its southern and northern fronts is based, that is being brought down. While the nature of Hezbollah’s calculations for going to war against the State of Israel differs entirely from those of Hamas, Israel is also discovering that it is profoundly vulnerable on its northern borders, where the defence system was roughly similar to that around the Gaza Strip<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the unprecedented commitment of the United States to the Israeli authorities in this war through the deployment of warships for deterrence purposes, strategic advice, arms supplies, as well as operational and logistical support demonstrates that Israel is not in a position to defend itself alone<sup>3</sup>. For all these reasons, the war that is currently being waged in the Gaza Strip is considered and experienced as “existential” by the Israeli authorities and population.

The war goals declared by the Israeli cabinet<sup>4</sup> in response to the October 7 attacks are substantial: to destroy Hamas’s military and government capabilities, to ensure the security of Israel’s borders and to bring back the hostages. Unlike the offensives carried out in the Gaza Strip since Hamas took power in 2007 (in 2008, 2012, 2014 and 2021), it is no longer sufficient for the Israeli authorities to regularly weaken Hamas’s military capabilities by “cutting the grass” as put by its leaders. This time, according to an adviser close to decision-making circles in Israel, the aim is to eliminate not only the officials affiliated to Hamas, but also its entire military and political leadership, along with destroying its military arsenal and weapons production capacity<sup>5</sup> and eventually set up “a new security regime” in Gaza<sup>6</sup>. The analysis made by the Israeli establishment is that, in light of the failure of the strategy of deterrence developed *vis-à-vis* Hamas since 2007, establishing a new system of administrative and security management of Gaza is the only way to ensure the security of its citizens.

While such goals may be considered legitimate from the Israeli point of view, they do not appear to be realistic. Even within the Israeli decision-making circle, the operationalisation of these objectives is anything but clear<sup>7</sup>. At this stage Hamas, all its branches combined, is far from being dismantled. According to statements by the Israeli armed forces, a few dozen leaders, including battalion commanders, and several hundred fighters of the armed wing of the Islamist group – the Izz al Din al-Qassam brigades – were killed<sup>8</sup>. However, most of the senior military and political leaders have not yet been harmed<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, Hamas undoubtedly has a chain of

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<sup>2</sup> A few days after October 7, the Israeli authorities launched several operations to evacuate villages near the border with Lebanon. Some of the inhabitants say they will not return until the Israeli army puts an end to the potential threats from Hezbollah (Adi Hashmonai, “Israel Plans to Evacuate Communities Close to Border With Lebanon, Many Refuse to Leave”, [Haaretz](#), 17 October 2023).

<sup>3</sup> “U.S. Helps Israel Defend Against Hamas Attacks”, [US Department of Defense](#), 9 October 2023.

<sup>4</sup> On 11 October, Prime Minister B. Netanyahu set up a war cabinet which includes the leader of the opposition political alliance, the National Unity Party, and former Chief of Staff B. Gantz, and current Defence Minister Y. Gallant, as well as, as observers, G. Eisenkott, also a former Chief of Staff and figure in the National Unity Party, and R. Dermer, Minister of Strategic Affairs and close adviser to B. Netanyahu.

<sup>5</sup> According to the same adviser, no decision has yet been taken on a campaign to systematically destroy the tunnels, mainly because of the technological challenge that this represents at this stage (interview, 8 November 2023).

<sup>6</sup> See the statement by the Israeli Defence Minister, Y. Gallant, at a meeting of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee: “Israel sets out 3 phases of war; will seek new ‘security regime’ once Hamas vanquished”, [The Times of Israel](#), 20 October 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with an official close from Israeli decision-making circles, 8 November 2023.

<sup>8</sup> The Qassams have around 30,000 fighters. For Hamas officials killed during Israeli operations, see the [Israel Defense Forces](#) X account.

<sup>9</sup> See Amos Harel, “Israel’s Army Reaches the Heart of Gaza and Takes Aim at Hamas’ Final Defenses”, [Haaretz](#), 9 November 2023.

command prepared to take over<sup>10</sup>. This is the main reason why the Biden administration is reluctant to demand a “ceasefire” from its Israeli ally for the time being – considered “unfavourable” for Israel at this stage – and is therefore limiting its demands to “humanitarian pauses”.

The feasibility of the military objectives declared by the war cabinet is not only challenged by a cold analysis of their feasibility, but also the human cost they represent in a territory that is one of the most densely populated areas in the world<sup>11</sup>. According to an adviser close to Israeli decision-making circles, the Israeli military believes that the longer the war goes on, the more likely it will be able to deal a decisive blow to Hamas<sup>12</sup>. But if Israel were to continue its operations at the current pace, the consequences for the Gaza Strip and its 2.2 million inhabitants would be even more dramatic than it is today, and that without ensuring that the war's objectives could really be achieved. While the Israeli authorities keep repeating that the war will be long, the price paid by the Palestinians in Gaza as a result of the Israeli strikes on the thirty-eighth day of the war (13 November) is already exorbitant: more than 11,200 people killed, the vast majority of them civilians, including more than 4,500 children; more than 27,400 wounded; more than 700,000 people forcibly displaced; massive destruction of civilian homes and infrastructure in a territory that has seen its development decline steadily since 2008; an unprecedented humanitarian crisis<sup>13</sup>.

At this stage, two options for the tactical development of the military operations are being discussed within the Israeli political and military establishment<sup>14</sup>. The first scenario would be to continue operations in the current configuration – that is, a ground invasion supported by intensive bombing – to eventually reach the south of the Gaza Strip where according to the Israeli authorities there is “ Hamas infrastructure that must be destroyed”<sup>15</sup>. A second scenario would entail the withdrawal of Israeli infantry from Gaza City and the conduct of land incursions for targeted operations, along maritime and air support.

A number of factors will influence decision-making on the tactical development of operations. Those include success in achieving purely military objectives such as the continuation of operations as far south as possible in the current mode is considered to be more “effective”<sup>16</sup>; the need to limit the risks of a regional conflagration with the opening of at least a new front in the north, or even in East Jerusalem and the West Bank; and finally the question of maintaining unfailing support from the United States – and to a lesser extent from the Europeans. Ultimately, the Israeli authorities will not be able to reconcile all these parameters and will probably have to choose which ones to prioritise.

The situation on the northern front, as with the rest of the Palestinian Territories, is extremely volatile. The two speeches made since the start of the conflict by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah certainly do not go beyond the usual rhetoric<sup>17</sup>. Above all, they seem to have enabled him to justify to his base the fact that the armed group has not yet entered into a full

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with a Palestinian expert of Hamas, 9 November 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Around 2.2 million people live in an area of 365 km<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, 8 November 2023.

<sup>13</sup> “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel – reported impact | Day 37”, [OCHA](#), 12 November 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with an official close to Israeli decision-making circles, 8 November 2023.

<sup>15</sup> See “Israel’s Army Reaches the Heart of Gaza and Takes Aim at Hamas’ Final Defenses”, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Interview with an official close to Israeli decision-making circles, 8 November 2023.

<sup>17</sup> See the transcriptions of the speeches made on 3 and 11 November on [L’Orient-Le Jour](#).

confrontation with Israel<sup>18</sup>. However, the more the survival of Hamas is threatened, the more difficult it will seem for Hezbollah not to intervene without risking losing all legitimacy in its position as defender of the “axis of resistance”. Besides, the acceleration in the exchange of fire and clashes on both sides of the border means that the risks of escalation are already very real. The West Bank also finds itself in a particularly explosive situation. Plagued by violent outbreaks in several areas – such as the cities of Jenin, Hebron, Ramallah and Nablus –, the West Bank could become the scene of widespread unrest that is difficult to control.

At this stage only the United States, on which Israel appears to be extremely dependent, could be in a position to influence Israeli decision-makers on the course of the war<sup>19</sup>. Following calls for humanitarian “truces” or “pauses”, and reminders of the parties’ obligation to protect civilian populations in accordance with international law<sup>20</sup>, the United States – but also several European states, including France – could end up worrying about domestic public opinion. Other potential concerns include the risks posed to their own territory by the importation of the conflict, the deterioration of their relations with the Arab states in the region and the challenges posed by a regional war in which they would inevitably find themselves involved<sup>21</sup>. While for the time being the United States has refused to call for a ceasefire and argued that “*Israel has the right to defend itself*”<sup>22</sup>, it could also decide to encourage Israel to monitor more incursion-type operations in parallel to “humanitarian pauses”. Besides, Washington has already expressed concern about the negative consequences the humanitarian crisis, as well as the scale of destruction and lack of protection of Palestinian civilians, would have on a strategy to end the war<sup>23</sup>.

## Israel ignores the question of the “day after”

Following pressure from the United States, the Israeli Prime Minister very recently gave instructions to some of his administrations to start working on possible options for political and

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<sup>18</sup> In his speech on November 3, Hassan Nasrallah called on his supporters not to play down Hezbollah’s actions against Israel since October 7, saying: “*For those who call on Hezbollah to enter into open warfare, what is happening on the border may seem moderate. But this is not the case. And we will not be content with that*”.

<sup>19</sup> According to a French diplomat, the Israelis’ main trusted partner is still the United States, which is the only country able to provide them with security guarantees. The Europeans, including President Macron, are only secondary interlocutors (interview, 10 November 2023).

<sup>20</sup> White House spokesperson John Kirby announced on November 9 that Israel agreed to observing daily “pauses”, lasting four hours, in the north of the Gaza strip (see “Press Gaggle with NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby”, [The White House](#), 9 November 2023). Some European countries, such as Belgium and Ireland, are calling for a ceasefire. France is “*in favour of an immediate, lasting and sustained humanitarian truce, leading to a ceasefire*” (see “Conférence humanitaire internationale pour la population civile de Gaza – Discours de clôture de Catherine Colonna, ministre de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères”, [France Diplomatie](#), 9 November 2023). Germany, through the voice of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, is refusing to call for a ceasefire: “*I freely admit that I do not think that calls for an immediate ceasefire or for a long pause – which would amount to almost the same thing – are fair, because this would ultimately mean that Israel is giving Hamas the opportunity to recover and obtain new missiles*” (see “Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz in Heilbronn”, [Heilbronner Stimme](#), 12 November 2023).

<sup>21</sup> See interview of French Defence Minister on [LCI](#) on November 12, during which he declared that the way in which Israel will manage the conflict in the future will have an impact on “*the Middle East will find itself over the next ten or fifteen years*”, and that “*Hamas must be put out of action, but the way in which civilian populations are treated can have an impact on controlling the overall escalation*”.

<sup>22</sup> “Blinken en désaccord avec les dirigeants arabes au sujet de l’appel au cessez-le-feu”, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> “*Providing immediate aid and protection for Palestinian civilians in the conflict is also a necessary foundation for finding partners in Gaza who have a different vision for the future than Hamas – and who are willing to help make it real. We can’t find those partners if they are consumed by a humanitarian catastrophe and alienated by our perceived indifference to their plight. In sum, protecting Palestinian civilians and facilitating humanitarian assistance are not only the right things for Israel to do – but they will also advance its long-term security*” (Antony Blinken, “Antony Blinken: Defending Israel is essential. So is aiding civilians in Gaza”, [The Washington Post](#), 31 October 2023).

security governance in the Gaza Strip at the end of the war. However, at this stage, Israeli military operations are not based on a clear strategy for ending the crisis<sup>24</sup>.

According to an adviser close to Israeli decision-making circles, there is a gap between the United States and the Israeli war cabinet over which options to adopt<sup>25</sup>. On one side, Washington insists on the need for the Palestinian Authority to return to the Gaza Strip, as reflected in statements by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. On the other side, the Israeli war cabinet currently remains reluctant to consider this idea and is more inclined to set up a “local Gazan council” that would work in limited coordination with Ramallah. The latter option is in line with the concerns of Israeli authorities, including opposition figures in the war cabinet B. Gantz and G. Eisenkott, who are highly critical of the Palestinian Authority (PA), which is seen as an unreliable and hostile partner. This “local Gazan council” would not include any PA representative but rather civil society figures, academics, representatives of certain PLO factions, Palestinians from the diaspora or from the West Bank – Hamas’s representatives excluded<sup>26</sup>. In other words, this option would mean setting up a Palestinian administration in the Gaza Strip, linked to Ramallah – but not under Ramallah’s control – which would be responsible for the civil and security management of the area. Similarly to Zone A in the West Bank, the Israeli forces would not only reserve the right to intervene at any time but would also coordinate with the “local council” on security matters, as is currently the case with the Palestinian Authority’s security forces<sup>27</sup>.

Neither of these scenarios can be considered viable and show little regard for Palestinian reality. No Palestinian actor will take the risk of establishing his authority in Gaza – provided that Hamas’s political and military leadership is dismantled – after an Israeli victory. The Palestinian Authority is already perceived as “collaborating” with Israeli authorities by the vast majority of Palestinians, who also denounce its corruption and authoritarian drift<sup>28</sup>. This crisis of legitimacy has led to the PA’s gradually losing the ability to control the territories under its authority in the West Bank, as shown by the emergence of a new generation of armed groups<sup>29</sup>. Any move by the Palestinian Authority in this direction would not only deal a fatal blow to its legitimacy, it would also accentuate its dislocation, which is already underway. Implementing a “local council” as it is intended by the Israeli authorities – that is, a council emptied of political substance and deprived of sovereign powers – would find it difficult to avoid a similar fate.

Besides, what would be the point for the PA or the supposed actors of a local council to bear the burden of the civil and security management of a territory that will not only be a security quagmire – it is inconceivable, even according to the Israeli leaders, to eliminate all the Qassam fighters and other armed groups<sup>30</sup> –, but which will also struggle to recover from the humanitarian crisis caused by the Israeli operations? It is an illusion to think that the Palestinian Authority or a “local council” would be able to manage the Gaza Strip administratively and in terms of security in such a context.

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with an official close to Israeli decision-making circles, 8 November 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Interview, 8 November 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with an official close to Israeli decision-making circles, 8 November 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Under the Oslo II Accords (1995), the West Bank is divided into three areas: Area A (around 18 percent of the territory), whose administrative and security management is the responsibility of the Palestinian Authority (PA); Area B (around 24 percent of the territory), under the administrative control of the PA but under Israeli security control; and Area C (around 60 percent of the territory) under Israeli administrative and military control.

<sup>28</sup> “Realigning European Policy toward Palestine with Ground Realities”, *Crisis Group Report*, 23 August 2022.

<sup>29</sup> “The New Generation of Palestinian Armed Groups: A Paper Tiger?”, *Crisis Group Commentary*, 17 April 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with an official close to Israeli decision-making circles, 8 November 2023.

Finally, the idea put forward by the local and international media as well as certain statements, notably in Europe, on the advisability of setting up a multinational force as a possible alternative to the governance of Hamas in the Gaza Strip can be considered equally unrealistic as that of the establishment of a “local council”<sup>31</sup>. The form and composition of such a force have yet to be defined, but the idea of participation by Arab countries has been widely reported in the local and international media. European Commission President U. von der Leyen mentioned the idea of a UN-mandated peacekeeping force – without providing any further details<sup>32</sup>. These thoughts are disconnected with the options currently being discussed by Washington and Tel Aviv and overlook the fact that Israel has always categorically refused to entrust its security to an outside player. Furthermore, regardless of security and administrative challenges posed by such a mission, it seems unlikely that the Arab states in the region would be prepared to take the risk of being perceived as working for the Israelis.

### The end of the war cannot overlook politics

However inaudible this may be for Israel, in view of the atrocity of the October 7 attacks and the trauma they represent for the Israeli population, the lesson to be learned from the current war runs counter to what the vast majority of Israeli leaders have tried to make their population believe since the Oslo agreements failed. Reducing the Palestinian question to security management with a few *ad hoc* economic concessions cannot guarantee the security of its citizens<sup>33</sup>. The only – minority – voices on the left that dared to speak out have failed to gain influence for years<sup>34</sup>.

European states bear a great deal of responsibility for the Israeli security headlong rush<sup>35</sup>. Since the failure of the Oslo process, Europe has tirelessly insisted on the need to achieve a two-state solution, without, however, outlining a proactive policy that would encourage the players in the conflict to take steps in this direction. On the contrary, the European Union and its member states have favoured a policy of short-term micro-management to maintain relative stability, and have tried to compensate for their political disengagement with development aid and humanitarian assistance. The repeated wars in Gaza since 2008, including the repeated outbreaks of violence in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, have not altered the trajectory of European policy despite warnings not only from experts but also from diplomats deployed on the field about this “time bomb”. Behind such inertia are certainly internal European disagreements, but above all the calculations of the main member states, which consider the cost of diplomatic investment too high and its benefits too uncertain for a conflict that is ultimately perceived as “contained”. This approach is certainly understandable in view of the major foreign policy challenges facing the Europeans, but it is deeply flawed. The past weeks are

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<sup>31</sup> See for instance Patrick Wintour, “What happens to Gaza the day after the war ends?”, [The Guardian](#), 5 November 2023.

<sup>32</sup> “*First of all, Gaza can be no safe haven for terrorists. We know what happened after the previous Gaza wars. Hamas immediately started rebuilding its arsenal and preparing for the next conflict. This cannot be the case any longer. Different ideas are being discussed on how this can be ensured, including an international peace force under UN mandate*” (“Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2023”, [European Commission](#), 6 November 2023).

<sup>33</sup> On the ‘shrinking the conflict’ policy, see Patrick Kingsley, « ‘Shrinking the Conflict’: What Does Israel’s New Mantra Really Mean? », [The New York Times](#), 30 September 2021.

<sup>34</sup> See for instance « Israël : ‘Je n’ai pas confiance en Netanyahu pour cette guerre’, une conversation avec le général Yaïr Golan », [Le Grand Continent](#), 29 October 2023.

<sup>35</sup> On European policy on Palestinians territories, see « Realigning European Policy toward Palestine with Ground Realities », *op. cit.*



evidence of this, starting with the suffering of Israelis and Palestinians alike, to concerns over a regional conflagration.

European initiatives to allow access to humanitarian aid are necessary. Considering the uncertainties surrounding the future course of the war, it is the duty of European countries to ensure humanitarian access and the protection of civilians. In this context, European initiatives such as the international humanitarian conference for Gaza in Paris on November 9, 2023 are welcome<sup>36</sup>. But they are not enough, and it is essential that Europeans learn from their past mistakes.

In the current context, this means first and foremost that Europeans must call for a ceasefire and work on the conditions for achieving it. The course of the war certainly shows that the only external interlocutor capable of influencing Israeli decision-making circles is Washington, but there is nothing to prevent certain European Union member states from working together, with the support of their regional partners, to convince the United States of the need to force the parties to define the terms of a ceasefire.

In the long run, Europeans must go against the current majority view in Israel, namely that the October 7 events have destroyed any hope of a peace process. Europe must make Israel understand, however inaudible it may be at this stage, that the security of its citizens cannot be achieved without resolving the political equation of the Palestinian question. With regard to the Palestinians, the Europeans must work to create the conditions for political renewal, without which any political momentum is illusory. The European policy of strengthening Mahmoud Abbas in recent years in the hope of weakening Hamas has not only failed, it has proved counter-productive. First, because it has enabled the President of the Palestinian Authority to ignore all the European pressure to renew the political scene in the Palestinian Territories – constant postponement of the holding of general elections, repeated failures of the reconciliation process between Fatah and Hamas – which could eventually have led to the reunification of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip<sup>37</sup>. This policy left the door open to growing authoritarianism on the part of the Palestinian Authority, aggravating its legitimacy crisis, which Hamas was able to capitalise on. As a result, the Palestinian scene is now reduced to an Authority seen by its people as a “subcontractor” of the Israeli occupation, and to fragmented Palestinian political parties which, like Fatah, are struggling to find a political figure capable of uniting people around a common political project. Today, Europe lacks interlocutors capable of providing a way out of the crisis, as underlined by the unrealistic nature of all the scenarios considered for an end to the crisis in Gaza – and even more so of initiating a genuine peace process in the future.

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<sup>36</sup> “Conférence humanitaire internationale pour la population civile de Gaza”, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> The mandate of the President of the Palestinian Authority finished in 2009. The last general elections took place in 2005 (presidential elections won by Mahmoud Abbas) and 2006 (parliamentary elections won by Hamas).

Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS)

55 rue Raspail 92300 Levallois-Perret

Fondation reconnue d'utilité publique par décret du 26 février 1993

Directeur de la publication : Bruno Racine

ISSN : 2273—4643

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