

Hamas Winning Battle for Gaza

By Scott Ritter

The recently announced ceasefire is a blessing for Palestinians and Israelis alike—a chance for prisoners to be exchanged, humanitarian aid to be distributed to those in need, and for emotions on both sides of the conflict to cool down.

While the ceasefire, negotiated between Israel and Hamas by Qatar, was mutually agreed between the two parties, let no one be fooled into thinking this was anything less than a victory for Hamas.

Israel had taken a very aggressive position that, given its stated objective of destroying Hamas as an organization, it would not agree to a ceasefire under any conditions.

Hamas, on the other hand, had made one of its primary objectives in initiating the current round of fighting with Israel the release of Palestinian prisoners, and in particular women and children, held by Israel. Seen in this light, the ceasefire represents an important victory for Hamas, and a humiliating defeat for Israel.

One of the reasons Israel eschewed a ceasefire was that it was confident that the offensive operation it had launched into [northern Gaza](#) was going to neutralize Hamas as a military threat, and that any ceasefire, regardless of the humanitarian justification, would only buy time for a defeated Hamas enemy to rest, refit, and regroup. That Israel signed on to a ceasefire is the surest sign yet that all is not well with the Israeli offensive against Hamas.

This outcome should not have come as a surprise to anyone. When Hamas launched its October 7 attack on Israel, it initiated a plan years in the making. The meticulous attention to detail that was evident in the Hamas operation underscored the reality that Hamas had been studying the Israeli intelligence and military forces arrayed against it, uncovering weaknesses that were subsequently exploited. The Hamas action represented more than sound tactical and operational planning and execution—it was a masterpiece in strategic conceptualization as well.

One of the main reasons behind the Israeli defeat on October 7 was the fact that the Israeli government was convinced that Hamas would never attack, regardless of what the intelligence analysts charged with watching Hamas activity in Gaza were saying. This failure of imagination came about by Hamas having identified the political goals and objectives of Israel (the nullification of Hamas as a resistance organization by undertaking a policy built on “buying” Hamas through an expanded program of work permits issued by Israel for Palestinians living in Gaza.) By playing along with the work permit program, Hamas lulled the Israeli

leadership into complacency, allowing Hamas' preparations for their attack to be carried out in plain view.

The October 7 attack by Hamas was not a stand-alone operation, but rather part of a strategic plan possessing three main objectives —

To put the issue of a Palestinian state back on the front burner of international discourse,

To free the thousands of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, and

To compel Israel to cease and desist when it came to its desecration of the Al Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third holiest place.

The October 7 attack, on its own, could not achieve these outcomes. Rather, the October 7 attack was designed to trigger an Israeli response which would create the conditions necessary for Hamas' objectives to reach fruition.

The October 7 attack was designed to humiliate Israel to the point of irrationality, to ensure that any Israeli response would be governed by the emotional need for revenge, as opposed to a rational response designed to nullify the Hamas objectives. Here, Hamas was guided by the established Israeli doctrine of collective punishment (known as the Dahiya Doctrine, named after the West Beirut suburb that was heavily bombed by Israel in 2006 as a way of punishing the Lebanese people for Israel's failure to defeat Hezbollah in combat.)

By inflicting a humiliating defeat on Israel which shattered both the myth of Israeli invincibility (regarding the Israel Defense Forces) and infallibility (regarding Israeli intelligence), and by taking hundreds of Israelis hostage before withdrawing to its underground lair beneath Gaza, Hamas baited a trap for Israel which the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu predictably rushed into.

HAMAS statement on truce and releasing the hostages

- HAMAS announces it reached agreement with Israel on four-day humanitarian truce in Gaza
- Israel to suspend all flights over southern Gaza for duration of truce, in northern Gaza flights prohibited from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- HAMAS agreed with Israel that it will release 50 hostages, women and children under 19, in exchange for 150 Palestinians being held
- HAMAS reached agreement with Israel to allow humanitarian aid into all areas of Gaza Strip
- Israel vowed not to arrest Palestinians in Gaza during truce, let them move between southern, northern parts of enclave

Hamas has prepared a network of tunnels underneath the Gaza Strip that, in total, stretch for over 500 kilometers. Nicknamed the “Gaza Metro,” these tunnels consist of interconnected deep underground bunkers used for command and control, logistical support, medical treatment, and billeting, along with other tunnel networks dedicated for both defensive and offensive operations. The tunnels are buried deep enough to avoid destruction by most bombs in Israel’s possession and have been provisioned to withstand a siege of up to three months (90 days) in duration.

Hamas knows that it cannot engage Israel in a classic force-on-force encounter. Instead, the goal was to lure Israeli forces into Gaza, and then subject these forces to an endless series of hit-and-run attacks by small teams of Hamas fighters who would emerge from their underground lairs, attack a vulnerable Israeli force, and then disappear back underground.

In short, to subject the Israeli military to what is the equivalent of a death by a thousand cuts.

And it worked. While Israeli forces have been able to penetrate into the less urbanized areas of the [northern Gaza strip](#), taking advantage of the mobility and firepower of its armored troops, the progress is illusory, as Hamas forces harry

the Israelis continuously, using deadly tandem-warhead rockets to disable or destroy Israeli vehicles, killing scores of Israeli soldiers and wounding hundreds more. While Israel has been reticent in releasing the figures of armored vehicles lost in this fashion, Hamas claims the number is in the hundreds. Hamas' claims are bolstered by the fact that Israel has halted the sale of older Merkava 3 tanks, and instead has organized their inventory of these vehicles into new reserve armor battalions to make up for the heavy losses being sustained in both Gaza and along the northern border with Lebanon, where Hezbollah forces are engaged in a deadly war of attrition with Israel in operations designed to support Hamas in Gaza.

But the main reason for Israel's defeat to date is Israel itself. Having taken the bait, and fallen into the Hamas trap, Israel went on to execute its **Dahiya Doctrine** against the Palestinian population of Gaza, carrying out indiscriminate attacks against civilian objects in blatant disregard for the law of war. An estimated 13,000 Palestinian civilians have been killed by these attacks, including more than 5,000 children. Many thousands more victims remain buried under the rubble of their destroyed housing.

While Israel may have been able to garner the support of the international community in the aftermath of the October 7 attack by Hamas, its gross overreaction has instead turned world public opinion against it—something Hamas was counting on. Today, Israel is increasingly isolated, losing support not only in the so-called Global South, but also in traditional strongholds of pro-Israeli sentiment in the US, UK, and Europe. This isolation, combined with the kind of political pressure Israel is unaccustomed to receiving, helped contribute to the Netanyahu government's acquiescence regarding the ceasefire and subsequent prisoner exchange.

Whether the ceasefire will hold or not remains to be seen. So, too, the question of turning the ceasefire into a lasting cessation of hostilities remains an open question. But one thing is certain—having declared that victory is defined by [Hamas' total defeat](#), the Israelis have set the stage for a Hamas victory, something Hamas achieves simply by surviving.

But Hamas is doing more than surviving — it is winning. Having fought the [Israel Defense Forces](#) to a standstill on the battlefield, Hamas has seen every one of its strategic objectives in this conflict reach fruition. The world is actively articulating the absolute necessity of a two-state solution as a prerequisite for a lasting peace in the region. Palestinians held prisoner by Israel are being exchanged for the Israelis Hamas took hostage. And the Islamic world is united in condemning Israel's desecration of the Al Aqsa Mosque.

None of these issues were on the table on October 6. That they are being addressed now is testament to the success Hamas enjoyed on October 7 and in the days and weeks that followed, as Israeli forces were defeated by a

combination of Hamas' tenacity and their own predilection for indiscriminate violence against civilians.

Far from being eliminated as a military and political force, Hamas has emerged as perhaps the most relevant voice and authority when it comes to defending the interests of the Palestinian people.