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Gaza ceasefire exposes Israel's failures and lack of options



The Gaza ceasefire throws doubts on Israeli claims of the effectiveness of its massive attacks on the strip's population in targeting Hamas. This both raises questions about war aims, should the fighting resume, and about Israel's rebuttal of accusations it has disproportionately targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure.

The precise judicial determination is still up to the international courts in The Hague, the ICC, and the ICJ. But the situation after 15 months of relentless attacks on the Gaza Strip looks damning for the Israeli government and military.

While proportionality is often misconstrued in terms of only numbers, it can be more strongly linked to the military effectiveness of attacks measured against the number of civilian casualties and damage to essential civilian infrastructure.

In those terms, it now looks as if at the very least Israel has badly misjudged the military value of its attacks that have caused the deaths of probably well over 30,000 civilians and devastated hospitals, schools, and other civilian facilities. The truth is probably a lot uglier than that.

Israel claims it has severely degraded Hamas's fighting force and physical infrastructure, particularly its extensive tunnel network, which was purportedly the target of many of the attacks. Precise percentages are lacking, but there are intelligence estimates that almost half the tunnels might still be in place.

Hamas is still operational

In any case, the evidence of the continued ability of Hamas to emerge and strike and kill Israeli soldiers even in Northern Gaza just days before the ceasefire went into effect makes it likely that parts of its infrastructure are intact. The group is also still capable of launching rockets at Israeli towns.

Even if estimates of some 17,000 Hamas fighters killed out of a probable total strength

of 30,000 before the outbreak of the fighting are true, the Hamas organisation is clearly still operational, as could be seen from several rapidly organised parades in Gaza after the ceasefire.

Hamas has in fact been able to replenish its ranks to quite large an extent, according to Israeli and US intelligence estimates.

The stated goal of destroying Hamas has clearly not been achieved

While the group has suffered extensive losses and Israel claims its fighting capacity has been degraded, the stated goal of destroying Hamas has clearly not been achieved. By Israel's own definition, its military actions have not been as effective as it might have hoped for and as it had claimed.

The less than advertised military effectiveness of the Israeli attacks, taken together with other measures against the Palestinian population, including cutting off water and electricity supplies, not allowing sufficient aid to reach civilians and mass displacement, strengthens existing suspicions that there were motives other than military ones behind the way the campaign has been waged.

That there was going to be a military component to the response to the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 that killed some 1200 people and led to the taking of more than 250 hostages, stands to reason.

However, questions can and should be placed with the way this campaign has been conducted and what its aims were and still are in light of the fragile ceasefire.

The military value of the targets

Catharsis and the purging of a nation's own ghosts are not legitimate reasons for causing mass civilian casualties. Neither are domestic motives, such as proving to the country's

population that its political and military leaders were still capable of wreaking havoc on the enemy despite just having witnessed the largest killing of Jews post-WWII.

There might have been punitive and deterrent elements involved, i.e., attempts to intimidate the whole of the Palestinian population, terrorise it, to make clear the price that Israel would exact for letting Hamas carry out its attacks, rather than only target Hamas itself. There might also have been a message in that to the region and the world.

Or, some say, it's simply Netanyahu charting a course to survive the 7 October disaster politically and his even further-right coalition partners who see a chance to recolonise Gaza.

Whatever combination of the above considerations has been at play, it doesn't stand up under international law in terms of allowing the targeting of civilians. The military value of the targets plays a crucial role there, and the more we see from Gaza, the more this comes into doubt.

Donald Trump seems to think that there's little chance of the ceasefire holding

Making an assessment of the actual military effectiveness of the Israeli assault is important at this point because all signs point to a resumption of the fighting, probably towards or after the end of stage one of the ceasefire.

At least Donald Trump seems to think that there's little chance of the ceasefire holding. "That's not our war, it's their war", he is **reported** to have said dismissively after his inauguration.

He openly doubts the ceasefire will hold beyond the first stage. And since Netanyahu mostly agreed to the deal for Trump's benefit, this amounts to a green light from the US to keep going.

There's little doubt by now either that Netanyahu and his government, and the settler

party, Jewish Power, that left the coalition over the ceasefire, want the fighting to continue. They will be spurred on by the pictures from Gaza, showing Hamas picking up where it left off.

Even though an unknown number of Israeli hostages who are still alive and the bodies of those killed are to be exchanged in later stages of the ceasefire, this has never been the overriding rationale behind Netanyahu's plans.

Defeating Hamas

'Defeating Hamas' will be trotted out as the main reason for a renewal of the fighting. The relative success against Hezbollah and Iran and the developments in Syria will, if anything, have strengthened the desire for a total victory.

Trump's national security advisor pick, Mike Waltz, has also **said**, "Hamas will never govern Gaza. That is completely unacceptable." The new US government might thus also be provoked by the group now trying to show that it's still in place.



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Hanging over all this is the question of how Israel has conducted this war and what it really could want to achieve by a renewal of large-scale military operations at this point.

One Israeli think tank estimates that if the fighting continues as before, it will take several more years to 'get rid' of Hamas. Others admit

that Israel might never be able to completely achieve that goal. The toll on Palestinian civilians is barely part of the discussion.

Other options look equally unattractive, from total or partial military re-occupation to a return to the status quo ante and its familiar hardships and dangers.

In the end, Israel will have little choice but to find other ways of dealing with the realities on the ground, ones that don't involve the mass killing of the population. What that will be is still unclear, but given what we have seen so far, the answer is unlikely to be purely a military one.