How Hamas has survived Israel's military campaign in Gaza

written by Prof. Kobi Michael | 05.10.2025

On the second anniversary of Hamas's October 7, 2023, massacre, which sparked the war in Gaza – now Israel's longest – the question arises as to why the Islamic terror group remains undefeated.

Before addressing the reasons – and offering some explanations – it is first necessary to address the concept of defeat in relation to a semi-state terrorist organization such as Hamas.

Defeat is a military concept derived from the world of interstate wars, or armed conflict between two or more state armies. Such wars are waged on defined fronts, distinguishing between combatants and civilians, and staying within the boundaries of the international laws of war. Even for ending such conflicts, there are mechanisms recognized by international institutions such as the United Nations. In this world, to defeat an army means to deprive it of the ability or will to continue fighting.

In a world of non-state or semi-state actors such as Hamas, war is conducted completely differently. For a religious terrorist organization with a nationalistic sentiment motivated by a supranational ideology committed to the re-establishment of the Islamic caliphate, the separation between the civil or political realm and the military echelons is almost nonexistent.

Supporting Hamas

Hamas's military wing is far more significant and influential than its political arm, despite being responsible for governing Gaza for more than 18 years. During that time, the organization, which grew out of the population, has compounded its support among the people, and that support continues to grow after October 7, according to some polls. In short, the organization is deeply embedded in Gaza's civil society and operates from within it.

Under these conditions, there is no single point of gravity for Hamas that could cause its downfall. Defeat, in terms familiar to the world of interstate wars, is

almost impossible without the widespread destruction of the civilian population, a war crime or a form of genocide that Israel would never commit.

The expectation of many for a clear victory in the style of the Six Day War, with Hamas waving a white flag, is an illusion. Fortunately, the Israeli government and the military are aware of the problems involved in defeating Hamas and understand that defeat, in this instance, means dismantling the organization as an effective governmental and military entity.

So, why, after two years, has Israel not yet succeeded in achieving that?

First, the strategic choice to attack Hamas and the Gaza Strip gradually, starting in the north of the territory and reaching other areas later on, turned out to be wrong. Secondly, the method of occupying an area, clearing it of terrorist infrastructure, and then abandoning it, also proved problematic. Israel found itself returning to the same areas it had already cleared multiple times. And finally, the IDF echelon's reluctance to occupy the entire Gaza Strip and impose military rule in the early stages of the war also turned out to be a mistake.

International pressure

Beyond Israel's erroneous military decisions, the more substantial reasons are external.

The fact that Israel faced a multi-front regional war forced it to spread its resources; it also found itself exposed to tremendous international pressure that was devoid of any strategic or moral logic.

The international community, including the US administration, forgot the October 7 attack very quickly. When reports began to emerge of Palestinian civilian casualties, the international community began forcing Israel to increase humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip.

Israel was also forced to allow humanitarian aid to enter active combat zones and eventually found itself fighting Hamas while at the same time feeding Hamas, allowing this murderous terrorist organization to continue to sustain itself.

Hamas's control over the distribution of humanitarian aid allowed the group to maintain its mechanisms of control over the territory and, especially, the people.

It suppressed any possibility of rebellion and prevented the establishment of an alternative civilian government.

Beyond international pressure, Israel was exposed to the spread of false narratives by Hamas, narratives echoed by many in the international media, international aid organizations, and the UN.

Civilian casualties, starvation, and war crimes all became part of that narrative, despite the IDF's efforts to reduce the extent of collateral damage.

Understanding the international media well, Hamas succeeded in increasing the effect and, as a result, the pressure ramped up on Israel.

Additionally, Hamas's hostage-taking served to fuel tensions between Israeli society and the government, and between the military and political echelons. The regular protests by hostages' families across the country gave the government little room to maneuver.

Those protests spread to the international sphere, especially to the United States, putting pressure on the administration in a significant way, making it very difficult for Israel to operate militarily in instances such as taking control of Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah and the strategic Philadelphi Corridor.

Under president Joe Biden's administration, Israel was pressured to move forward in negotiations to end the war, even at the cost of impossible and unbearable concessions. This played into Hamas's hands and encouraged the organization's leadership to harden its positions.

In recent months, this international pressure has spilled over into economic and cultural spheres to the point of boycotts and refusals to allow the passage of planes or ships carrying weapons destined for Israel.

On the battlefield

Beyond all of this, it is important to consider the battlefield itself. Over the past decade and beyond, Hamas managed to build an extensive network of hundreds of kilometers of tunnels beneath Gaza

This has allowed Hamas's operatives to move freely and safely throughout the

Gaza Strip. A system of command and control rooms, weapons depots, rocket launch sites, and food, water, and fuel depots, under the cover of residential buildings and humanitarian facilities such as hospitals, clinics, schools, and mosques, also enable Hamas to breathe and survive.

No army in the world has experienced war under these conditions, and the task of destroying tunnels in a dense urban environment is complicated and slow-moving.

The fact that Hamas, deeply embedded in Palestinian civil society, continues to have the support of the population and, even in cases where it has lost popularity, manages to force civilians to serve as human shields, also makes the IDF's operations extremely difficult.

The presence of hostages in Gaza has complicated matters even further. The IDF must act with the utmost caution and avoid operating in areas where it thinks hostages might be present for fear of harming them.

Despite all the constraints and complexities, the military has made some impressive achievements, such as dismantling most of Hamas's military capabilities; eliminating its entire senior chain of command; killing tens of thousands of its combatants; and destroying its main command and control centers, as well as its weapons production facilities.

With the occupation of Gaza City and then the central refugee camps now in motion, the process of dismantling Hamas will be complete. Conditions for the establishment of an alternative civilian government will be a further blow to Hamas.

The final step, in order to defeat the organization and deprive it of the ability to recover in the future, must also include the elimination of its external leadership, which is what Israel tried to do recently in Doha, Qatar, but apparently failed.

This war began with a terrible disaster for Israel, a bloody humiliation, and a scar that will be etched in the collective consciousness for generations to come but continued with a series of impressive military achievements, far beyond the Gaza Strip.

With the end of the war, Israel and the IDF will record an impressive and historic victory, and the course of the war as a whole, and the Gaza War in particular, will

be studied for many years to come in military colleges around the world.

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