

For the first time in decades, Israel is imposing its will on Hamas

written by Prof. Zaki Shalom | 28.05.2026

The killing of Ahmed Jabari in November 2012 marked a dramatic turning point in the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Jabari, Hamas's top military commander, was killed in Gaza while traveling in his vehicle. Israel immediately braced for retaliation, and Hamas responded with massive rocket fire toward Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, triggering Operation Pillar of Defense.

The contrast between what happened then and what is happening today is almost unimaginable.

On May 15 of this year, Israel eliminated Izz al-Din al-Haddad, Hamas's chief military commander in Gaza. Ten days later, on May 26, Israel killed his successor, Mohammed Odeh. In the past, such consecutive blows against Hamas's senior military leadership would almost automatically have triggered a major regional escalation.

Yet this time, no significant response came.

These operations are not isolated events. They are part of a broader strategic process Israel has been carrying out in Gaza over recent months: the systematic destruction of Hamas's military infrastructure, including command centers, weapons depots, tunnel networks, and operatives across multiple levels of command.

At the same time, Israel has steadily expanded its operational and territorial control inside the Gaza Strip. Today, Israel reportedly controls approximately 65% of Gaza.

In previous years, such a reality would likely have generated enormous upheaval across the Arab world and intense international pressure. Territorial loss has historically been viewed as a major blow to Arab dignity and legitimacy.

Yet the current reaction has been remarkably muted. There is little indication that any regional or international actor is either willing or capable of reversing the reality now taking shape.

At the same time, a broader regional-political dimension is gradually emerging. The highly publicized meetings between Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) chief David Zini and Mohammed Dahlan, under Emirati sponsorship, appear to signal growing UAE involvement in efforts to shape a post-Hamas governing framework in Gaza.

Finally, statements by Israel's defense minister suggesting that the idea of

migration from Gaza remains on the table further reinforce the impression that long-term strategic planning is already underway.

Taken together, these developments point toward the emergence of a new regional reality.

Even while the confrontation with Iran has not fully concluded, Israel is signaling that it intends to reshape the strategic order in Gaza – likely in close coordination with the United States and at least some moderate Arab states, particularly the UAE.

It is time to say clearly: this is what victory looks like.

Victory is not merely the elimination of enemy commanders. Victory means imposing your strategic reality on your enemy while he lacks either the capability or the will to respond effectively. In practical terms, this approaches the meaning of unconditional surrender.

When Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke in the past about “total victory,” many Israelis mocked the phrase or dismissed it as unrealistic.

Part of the skepticism reflected Israel’s own historical experience. Israel has never truly experienced total victory in the classical sense. Its wars typically ended with international intervention, ceasefires, negotiations, and diplomatic arrangements.

Even Israel’s greatest military achievements – in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973 – did not culminate in the unconditional surrender of its enemies, as happened to Germany and Japan after World War II.

This time may be different.

Hamas is only able to react to Israel

For the first time, Israel appears to be approaching a reality in which its main enemy in Gaza can no longer meaningfully shape events, but only react to them. A similar, though slower and more cautious, process may now also be unfolding in Lebanon.

Israel’s recent actions in Gaza – and perhaps increasingly in Lebanon as well – suggest that the Middle East may be entering a new phase, one in which Israel’s principal adversaries no longer dictate the regional agenda.

And if that is indeed the case, then for the first time in decades, Israel is not merely surviving.

It is winning.

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