

Two Months that Shook the World: The First Phase of the Gaza War

As Israel resumes its bombing of Gaza, the risk of a wider regional war grows. Mouin Rabbani analyzes the military and propaganda battles between Hamas and Israel.

By [Mouin Rabbani](#), [Jeremy Scahill](#), and [Murtaza Hussain](#)

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On December 1, Israel resumed its bombing campaign against Gaza, and the civilian death toll is once again rising. Both Hamas and Israel accused the other of violating the [temporary truce](#). Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant has promised, "We will fight in the entire [Gaza] Strip." Despite meekly worded suggestions from Secretary of State Antony Blinken that Israel make an effort to reduce civilian deaths, the U.S. position remains one of full-throttled support for a military campaign that has killed more than 15,000 Palestinians, the vast majority of them children and other civilians.

In this special episode of Intercepted, political analyst Mouin Rabbani, co-editor of the Arab Studies Institute's ezine Jadaliyya, offers a provocative analysis of the current situation. In a discussion with Jeremy Scahill and Murtaza Hussain, Rabbani suggests that behind the belligerent rhetoric and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's proclamations he will eradicate Hamas, Israel may already be heading for a bloody quagmire it is unlikely to transform into an accomplishment of its stated goals.

"We're now well into the second month of this war, and the most Israel has been able to achieve is to raise the Israeli flag on a hospital. It's not exactly Iwo Jima," Rabbani says. The "Israeli military is a very effective killing machine when it's dropping 2,000-pound bombs from the air, but a rather mediocre fighting force when it comes to ground operations."

Rabbani describes the evolution of Hamas's strategy and tactics over the past decades and maps out several scenarios that might emerge in the coming period.

"The idea that you can wipe [Hamas] out, even if you fully succeed in conquering every

last square inch of the Gaza Strip, is an illusion,” he says. “It is effectively impossible to resume this war without regional escalation.”

Jeremy Scahill (JS): This is Intercepted.

Welcome to Intercepted. I’m Jeremy Scahill.

Murtaza Hussain (MH): And I’m Murtaza Hussain.

JS: Maz it seems like the hardliners in Israel are getting their way. On Friday morning the temporary truce was shattered. Israel claims that Hamas fired rockets. Hamas is saying that Israel broke the truce. Regardless of how it happened, we are now back to a situation where Israel has resumed heavy bombardment. Early indications are that they’re increasing their campaign in the south of Gaza. And Israel began its military operations literally as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was taking off to depart Israel.

[Antony Blinken](#): Well, good evening everyone and thanks for bearing with us through a long day. So this is my fourth trip to Israel since the Hamas terrorist attacks of October 7th.

JS: And it really seems like every time Blinken goes to the region or goes to Israel, it’s then followed by an intensification of Israeli military tactics. And you know Blinken has been trying to publicly sell this talking out of both sides of the mouth from Washington. On the one hand giving full-throttled support to Israel and on the other hand saying, well, we want to try to put some guardrails on Israel’s operations. And one of the things that Blinken said is:

[Antony Blinken](#): But Israel has the most sophisticated — one of the most sophisticated — militaries in the world. It is capable of neutralizing the threat posed by Hamas while minimizing harm to innocent men women and children.

JS: All we’ve seen from Israel since this started was the opposite. We’ve seen that Israel clearly wants to maximize the terror being felt by civilians in Gaza. And part of it seems aimed at saying we’re gonna force them through merciless bombing to somehow overthrow Hamas. But it shows a kind of fundamental misunderstanding of the lens of history that many Palestinians are viewing this through and also the history of Hamas itself.

MH: Well, if you look at the satellite footage and even statements from Israeli officials, it is clear that their campaign is not aimed at minimizing damage to the Palestinian people or civilian infrastructure, or civilians themselves. They’ve been carrying it out in such a way to punish the population and you’ve seen this in the death toll as well too.

So Blinken’s statement that Israel has the capability of minimizing the toll to civilians may be true per se but the implication is that they’re not taking that because they have the technology, they have the weaponry and so forth. But we would not be seeing these massive death tolls of 15-plus thousand people by some estimates — total destruction of Gaza City — were Israeli leaders taking, prioritizing and minimizing civilian harm or just focusing on Hamas per se. And we can see that they’re not just focusing on Hamas, not just by the toll on Gaza, but also by the actions of the West Bank recently, where Hamas is not in control and where Israel is still ramping up its suppression of Palestinians killings and the treatment of Palestinians in jail too, which is also deteriorated in recent weeks by many

reports.

So it's very, very clear that Israel is not behaving in the way that Blinken is portraying them as behaving or... This good cop bad cop attitude that the U.S. is taking towards Israel is really not very convincing, even on those terms. It's clear that Israel is engaging in tactics which we condemn very thoroughly when done by Russia or Syria or other countries that we're opposed to. But when we're seeing them in real time by [a] U.S. ally, we're getting at very minimum defense from the U.S. administration of Israeli actions.

JS: You know, now we're about two months into this acute aspect of the war. Of course, this war has been going on a lot longer and started far, far earlier than October 7th, of course. But we thought it would be good and worth it to look at these two months that have shook the world, and to do so we're joined by Mouin Rabbani. He's a researcher, analyst, and commentator specializing in Palestinian affairs, the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as the contemporary Middle East. He is the co-editor of Jadaliyya and contributing editor of Middle East Report.

Mouin thank you so much for being with us here on Intercepted.

Mouin Rabbani (MR): It's a real pleasure to be with you. Thanks for inviting me.

JS: Let's start with the very beginning of this acute aspect of the war. Of course, you can say this has been going on for a very, very long time, but... October 7th. First, talk about what you understand were the strategic objectives of Hamas in what they called "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood."

MR: Well, I think we're probably going to have to wait, and perhaps wait a long time, to get a definitive answer to that question. But the strategic objective, as I understand it, was to shatter the status quo, and to shatter it irrevocably.

It was a situation in which the Gaza Strip had been under blockade for 16, 17 years, the occupation was well into its sixth decade. Of course, there was also the dispossession of the Palestinians in 1948. And, in addition to that, what we had also seen was a number of escalating Israeli measures.

First of all, of particular interest to Hamas as an Islamist movement, the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Haram al-Sharif compound in Jerusalem, the growing settler pogroms, and dispossession and ethnic cleansing in the West Bank, particularly in the Jordan Valley.

So, on the one hand, you have those developments. On the other hand, you had a situation where Israel was increasingly seeking to unilaterally resolve the core issues of the question of Palestine, without any reference to either Palestinian rights or Palestinian interests, or even negotiations with those Palestinians who were most amenable to the Israeli agenda; here, I'm referring to the Palestinian leadership, the leadership of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah.

And the reason it was able to do this is because Israel had, on the one hand, the active support of the Americans. And, secondarily, the passive acquiescence of the Europeans, a passive acquiescence that has turned increasingly into active support as well. And I think the reason that Hamas decided it needed to do something, for lack of a better term,

genuinely spectacular on October 7th, is because they had attempted to shatter the status quo on two separate occasions, at least.

The first was the Great March of Return in 2018, when very large numbers of Palestinians went to the boundary between the Gaza Strip and Israel to demonstrate, on the anniversary of Nakba Day. And Israeli snipers shot and killed numerous Palestinians, wounded many more, medics were killed, and so on. And the world shrugged and, the following day, things returned back to what they were.

More recently, in 2021, represented the first time that an Israeli-Palestinian armed confrontation took place at the initiative of Hamas, rather than Israel. And, just as importantly, was initiated by Hamas for reasons that had nothing to do with conditions in the Gaza Strip. It was a response to growing Israeli incursions, and repression, and other measures in East Jerusalem; you may remember the attempted settlement expansion in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem. And then specifically, also the Al-Aqsa Mosque. And even then, that lasted for a few weeks, that was a so-called “Unity Intifada,” where you had Palestinians rising up in the West Bank within Israel, and then this confrontation between Palestinians and Israel in the Gaza Strip. A ceasefire was eventually established and, once again, things went back to their usual pattern.

I think, when you look at the scale of what we saw on October 7th, it can’t be seen as a response to the policies of the current far-right government in Israel: Netanyahu, Ben-Gvir, and Smotrich, and so on. Sure, that was a factor, but the planning for an operation of this size, scale, and scope must have started before — perhaps even well before — this government took office.

And so, I know there is a tendency to blame anything and everything on Netanyahu — it’s kind of a Netanyahu derangement syndrome, if you will — but the current government is more of a change in scale and intensity, rather than a change in policy. And the issues that I was discussing previously were more or less policies of previous Israeli governments, rather than the current one. In addition, of course, you had the prisoner file, which is of central importance, not only to Palestinians generally and to Hamas, particularly, but also to Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and seen as an architect of the October 7th attacks, personally.

So, if you take all of these issues together, my sense is that if you were to summarize Hamas’ strategic objective in one phrase, it would be to irrevocably shatter the status quo. Did they have very clear ideas of what they wanted beyond that? At the tactical level, yes. It’s quite clear that the reason they took so many Israeli soldiers captive and civilians hostage is because they wanted a comprehensive prisoner exchange, including people who they were unable to get released in the 2011 agreement, that led to the freedom for about a thousand Palestinian prisoners. They wanted changes with regard to the blockade, and so on.

But did they have a clear — and what they consider achievable — political objective? I haven’t really seen the evidence for that. My sense is they did not think that far ahead.

One last point is that I think we also need to recall that, on October 7th, the Israeli military and intelligence services not only failed but, at the first sign of contact, they collapsed like a house of cards. So, we have to consider it quite likely that the scale of the October 7th attacks far exceeded Hamas’s initial planning for that event, and that they ended up

basically operating in a geographical area that's larger than the Gaza Strip itself. I don't know to what extent Hamas planned for that. I suspect they didn't think they would be able to, and I suspect that many of these expanded operations were decided, and implemented, and conducted in the heat of the moment, simply because the Israeli defensive measures evaporated into thin air.

MH: Mouin, in the wake of October 7th, the Israeli government has said that its goal is to eradicate Hamas; in various terms, it said that. And it's reiterated that goal now, over a month into the operation. Despite that, Hamas, by all accounts, still seems to have considerable command and control inside Gaza. The recent prisoner exchange suggests as well that they're still very well entrenched, and Israel is still very, very far from achieving those stated military objectives.

From your sense, how realistic is this goal of destroying Hamas, or eradicating Hamas, as the Israeli government has put it. Is it an actually achievable objective for Israel? And, if so, what would it take to accomplish that?

MR: I don't think it's achievable at all, and I think we should view this primarily as a rhetorical aspiration, rather than a serious policy. It's quite possible that, on October 7th, Netanyahu Defense Minister Gallant, Chief of Staff, and their biggest champions in Washington — Biden and Blinken — believed that this would be, to use a phrase that was introduced in 2003, "a cakewalk," and could be easily achieved.

But even before this Israeli offensive started, let's look at the facts. Hamas and a number of other armed groups are also present in the West Bank. Hamas is a fairly modest militia, even if you compare it to other paramilitary organizations in that part of the world, and especially if you compare it to conventional state armies, and overwhelmingly, if you compare it to the nuclear power that is Israel, that is armed to the teeth with the most advanced weaponry in the U.S. arsenal. So, Hamas is already, in military terms, a quite modest outfit. That's referring to Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Then, when you talk about Hamas and other groups in the West Bank, they're not just modest. I mean, they're very lightly armed. Most of their weaponry consists of, at best, automatic weapons and explosives. Nevertheless, for the past two years, Israel has been conducting regular intensive raids, particularly in the northern West Bank, to wipe these organizations out. It has had the full cooperation of the Palestinian Authority in this campaign. And, if anything, the attacks emanating out of the West Bank — and Northern West Bank in particular — have been escalating.

So, if you can't eliminate an exceptionally poorly-armed series of militias that are, in many respects, not even a coherent military force from the West Bank where you have total control, and you have the cooperation of the Palestinian authorities, how can you expect to achieve that objective against a much better armed, more coherent, much larger and well developed Palestinian armed group in a territory that it has controlled for almost two decades? That would be my first answer.

Secondly, Hamas is not just a militia or an armed group. It is a deeply rooted movement that exists wherever Palestinian communities exist today, very much, like used to be the case — and in many respects still is a case — with the PLO and its constituent factions. So the idea that you can wipe this group out, even if you fully succeed in conquering every last square inch of the Gaza Strip, is also an illusion. You have the civil service, you have the social

services, you have the political movement. It's a whole network of agencies, organizations, and institutions, and so on.

And so, I think the most that Israel could hope to attain would be to wipe out the existing leadership and to severely degrade the military capabilities of Hamas, but only in the Gaza Strip. And even that has been a total failure. We're now well into the second month of this war, and the most Israel has been able to achieve is to raise the Israeli flag on a hospital. It's not exactly Iwo Jima.

And not only that, I think there's another point worth making, as your question implied: At the very outset of this war, Israel and the United States vowed, as you said, that they would eradicate Hamas, that there would be no truce until this objective was achieved, and that there would absolutely be no negotiations with this group. Well, if you look at the situation today, there has now been approximately a week of a truce, a whole series of exchanges of captives, and these have been the result of Qatari- and Egyptian-mediated negotiations between the United States and Israel on the one hand, and Hamas on the other. And the person who was leading the negotiations on behalf of Hamas is Yahya Sinwar, the very architect of the October 7th attack.

So, Israel and the United States have already climbed down pretty far from the tree they jumped into. They're negotiating, they're accepting truces, they are implementing agreements that overwhelmingly reflect the conditions initially proposed by Hamas, rather than by them. So, how can you eradicate an organization you're negotiating and reaching agreements with?

Of course, at some point, I do expect the Israeli offensive to resume, but I think we're now in a stage where most likely we'll see one, maybe one or two, furious Israeli attempts to inflict as much damage as they can. And then, I think the clock will start winding down pretty quickly.

JS: Mouin, these scenes that we have seen play out over the course of the exchanges of Israeli captives and Palestinian captives are surreal on a number of levels. On the one hand, Hamas is putting out fairly sophisticated video production on its side of the handovers. Sometimes they have drone photography that they're using to show the vehicles, we've also seen these scenes of several Israeli prisoners smiling at them, shaking their hands, waving at them, speaking to them.

And Hamas has what I think is a fairly sophisticated information operation that they're running. They also, in one of the exchanges, decided to do it right in the center of Gaza City...

MR: Twice, actually.

JS: Twice, right? The first time that it happened, I would have paid serious money to watch Netanyahu's face as that was happening.

But you also have Yahya Sinwar acting as a sort of commander-in-chief in battle, and reportedly went down into tunnels where some of the Israelis were being held, and had interactions with them. One of the released Israelis, an 85-year-old woman who identifies herself as a peace activist, has been telling Israeli media that she had an exchange with Yahya Sinwar, where she kind of shamed him for attacking them and said, "we're peace

activists.”

But what I’m getting at is that you have a much more sophisticated public imaging operation going on from Hamas, and I want to get your take on what’s at play there, and how this is being received in the broader Arabic language public in the world.

MR: Yes. Well, I would start by saying that Hamas propaganda in the early days was very crude and very ineffective. And what appears to be the case is that they’ve taken a page out of Hezbollah’s playbook. And here, I’m referring to the experience of Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant movement, in the 1990s, when it was launching increasingly successful attacks on Israeli occupation forces, and on their local collaborators, the so-called South Lebanon Army.

And every time Hezbollah would claim, “we attacked this and that base or outposts, we can confirm that we inflicted X casualties,” the Israeli military spokesman would come out and say, well, the Arabs are lying again. And this is propaganda, we’ve got everything under full control.

Then, with the technological developments that we saw in the 90s, Hezbollah began recording their attacks on video, and then broadcasting them on its television station, Al-Manar. And, pretty soon, what you had is not only their own constituency in Lebanon — and people in the Middle East, more broadly — realizing that this is an organization whose claims had a lot of credibility. But, also, that its increase in credibility was because it was telling the truth, it was being honest. And it wasn’t inventing and exaggerating achievements that didn’t exist.

And, most importantly, it got to a point where the Israeli public began to trust Hezbollah propaganda more than the propaganda of their own military and their own government. And what I think we’ve seen here is broadly similar.

I know your question was specifically about the release of captives, but what we’ve seen is a whole series of statements by Hamas’s military spokesperson, Abu Obaida, who’s now become perhaps the single most popular figure in the Middle East; that’s not Mahmoud Abbas, as Biden and Blinken would like you to think. And he not only makes statements, but backs them up with video that substantiates those statements.

My sense is that Hamas propaganda is directed — or, at least in the initial stages — was directed primarily at Palestinian and Arab public opinion, and also at Israeli public opinion. But then, when you began to get all these statements coming out of the Israeli leadership, out of the U.S., particularly from European capitals also, saying Hamas is ISIS, Hamas is worse than ISIS, Hamas are Nazis ... And it got to the point where people have actually been downplaying the Nazi Holocaust in order to suggest that the real issue here is not Adolf Hitler, but Yahya Sinwar, and so on.

Then Hamas also began, I think, trying to influence global, and particularly Western public opinion, which is, I think, a quite new arena for them. And the way they have tried to do this is to put out videos trying to demonstrate, whether you believe it or not, that they are treating their captives humanely, that they don’t consider attacking civilians a strategic goal, and so on.

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