

Israel possesses a formidable military capability, but it has never been able to turn this capability into a lasting victory against Hezbollah or Hamas. In every engagement, Israel eventually withdraws, leaving behind death, destruction and greater instability. Israel must realize that it cannot fight its way to peace in Gaza.

Israel cannot defeat Hamas



An Israeli soldier is seen among the destruction caused by Hamas fighters in Kibbutz Nir Oz during their October 7 raid in southern Israel on October 30, 2023.
● CHAIM GOLDBERG/FLASH90



By Emir
Hadžikadunić
Author at Fair
Observer

OPINION

In 1979, there were two significant developments in the Middle East. First, Israel and Egypt signed a historic peace treaty, the Camp David Accords. The accords did not specifically address the issue of occupied Palestinian territories, including Gaza. Second, the Iranian Revolution overthrew the Shah. This marked a change in the relationship between Israel and Iran. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established "Quds Day" as an annual event to express opposition to the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem and other Palestinian territories, including Gaza. (Quds is the Islamic name for Jerusalem.) These events had a profound regional impact, shaping politics and conflicts from the 1980s onward. Israel had defeated its Arab neighbors in several wars (1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973), but now resistance groups like Hezbollah and Hamas took their place. Backed by the US, Israel has in its favor a greater disparity in military power than history has ever seen. In conflicts with these fight-

ers (1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s), the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) won every battle. Despite this, Israel has never been able to secure a strategic victory. Each time, Hezbollah and Hamas emerged stronger and more determined in their resistance. With Israel engaged in another war against Hamas in Gaza, we are seeing the same conflict play out once again.

Israel's failed occupation of Lebanon

Over the past 40 years, Israel has demonstrated time and again that it cannot win wars against Hezbollah or end them by military means. On June 6, 1982, the IDF crossed into southern Lebanon and quickly advanced to the outskirts of Beirut. However, the war that Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon believed would last for just few days turned into Israel's version of Vietnam. By the end of the war, Israeli casualties totaled 455 dead and 2,460 wounded.

Hezbollah, a Shia Muslim resistance group, formed during this war. It forced the IDF to retreat 30 kilometers south of Beirut, a major setback for Israel. Faced with growing public pressure, Begin resigned on September 28, 1983. The new Israeli cabinet, led by Shimon Peres, faced the same challenges as before and eventually withdrew to a self-declared security buffer zone in southern Lebanon on January 14, 1985. This move set a precedent for future Israeli withdrawals from occupied territories without negotiated agreements with opposing sides. Israel left the battlefield to Hezbollah, which became a prominent actor in Lebanon and it solidified its presence and influence in the following years. Israeli dissatisfaction with the occupation of a buffer zone grew during the 1990s. It escalated following a 1997 helicopter crash in which 73 Israeli soldiers were killed. Ultimately, on May 23, 2000, the Israeli army executed the third

and final withdrawal of Israeli forces. The IDF pulled out of southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, effectively ending the 22-year occupation. It was the second Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories in Lebanon without a negotiated agreement, marking another strategic setback for Israel. After the withdrawal, the border with Lebanon remained unstable. Hezbollah expanded its missile and military capabilities in the area, and a new conflict erupted in the region only six years later. Although the Israeli army destroyed Lebanon's infrastructure in the 2006 Lebanon War, Hezbollah was not defeated. Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah called the war a "divine victory." For Israel, the conflict was a military failure. The conduct of the war discredited Israel's leadership, and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's approval ratings soon fell to 3%.

From Hezbollah to Hamas
Israel has demonstrated time

and again that it cannot win wars against Hamas or end them by military means. Israeli security forces have killed many leaders from the military and political wings of Hamas. In 2004, they killed Hamas's founder and spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Ismail Yasin. In the same year, they killed one of the co-founders of Hamas, Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi. Despite these targeted killings, Hamas has demonstrated the ability to rebuild its leadership, increase its popularity and act effectively as a political organization. It won the plurality of the vote in the 2006 Palestinian legislative election. Hamas maintained its presence in Gaza. Despite facing conflicts with Israel in 2008-09 (Operation Cast Lead), 2012 (Operation Pillar of Defense), 2014 (Operation Protective Edge), 2018 (Gaza Border Protests) and 2021 (Israel-Gaza Conflict), Hamas survived with support coming from regional actors like Iran, Qatar and Turkey. While Israel won each battle, Hamas, after suffer-