

## A Counterproductive Campaign

This historical pattern is repeating itself in Gaza. Despite more than two months of heavy military operations—virtually unrestrained by the United States and the rest of the world—Israel has achieved only marginal results. By any meaningful metric, the campaign has not led to Hamas's even partial defeat. Israel's air and ground operations have killed as many as 5,000 Hamas fighters (according to Israeli officials), out of a total of about 30,000. But these losses will not significantly reduce Hamas's power, since, as the October 7 attacks proved, it takes only a few hundred Hamas fighters to wreak havoc on Israel. Worse, Israeli officials also admit that the military campaign is killing twice as many civilians as Hamas fighters. In other words, Israel is almost certainly producing more fighters than it is killing, since each dead civilian will have family and friends eager to join Hamas to exact revenge.

Hamas's military infrastructure, such as it is, has not been meaningfully dismantled, even after the much-vaunted operations against the al-Shifa hospital, which the Israeli military alleged Hamas used as an operational base. As videos released by the Israeli Defense Forces show, Israel has captured and destroyed the entrances to many of Hamas's tunnels, but these can eventually be repaired, just as they were built in the first place. More important, Hamas's leaders and fighters appear to have abandoned the tunnels before Israeli forces entered them, meaning that the group's most important infrastructure—its fighters—survived. Hamas has an advantage over Israeli forces: it can easily abandon a fight, blend into the civilian population, and live to fight again on more favorable terms. That is why a large-scale Israeli ground operation is also doomed to failure.

More broadly, Israel's military campaign has not

deeply weakened Hamas's control over Gaza. Israel has rescued only one of the 240 or so captives taken in the October 7 attack. The only other captives freed have been released by Hamas, showing that the group remains in control of its fighters.

Despite large-scale power shortages and extensive destruction throughout Gaza, Hamas continues to churn out propaganda videos showing civilian atrocities committed by Israeli forces and intense battles between Hamas fighters and Israeli troops. The group's propaganda is distributed widely on the messaging app Telegram, where its channel has more than 620,000 subscribers. By the count of the University of Chicago Project on Security and Threats (which I direct), Hamas's military wing, the Qassam Brigades, has disseminated nearly 200 videos and posters every week from October 11 to November 22 through that channel.

## Land For Peace

The only way to deal a lasting defeat to Hamas is to attack its leaders and fighters while separating them from the surrounding population. That is easier said than done, however, especially since Hamas draws its ranks directly from the local population rather than from abroad.

Indeed, survey evidence shows the extent to which Israel's military operations are now producing more fighters than they are killing. In a November 14 poll of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank conducted by the Arab World for Research and Development, 76 percent of respondents said they viewed Hamas positively. Compare that with the 27 percent of respondents in both territories who told different pollsters in September that Hamas was "the most deserving of representing the Palestinian people." The implication is sobering: a vast portion of the more than 500,000 Palestinian men

between the ages of 18 and 34 are now ripe recruits for Hamas or other Palestinian groups seeking to target Israel and its civilians.

This result also reinforces the lessons of history. Contrary to conventional wisdom, most militants do not choose their vocation owing to religion or ideology, although some certainly do. Rather, most people who take up arms do so because their land is being taken away.

For decades, I've studied the most extreme militants—suicide attackers—and my study of 462 people who killed themselves on missions to kill others from 1982 to 2003 remains the largest demographic study of these assailants. I found that there are hundreds of secular suicide attackers. Indeed, the world's leader in suicide attacks during that period was the Tamil Tigers, an openly antireligious, Marxist group in Sri Lanka that carried out more suicide

operations than Hamas or Palestine Islamic Jihad—the two leading Palestinian groups—combined. What 95 percent of the suicide attackers in my database had in common was that they were fighting back against a military occupation that was controlling territory they considered their homeland.

From 1994 to 2005, Hamas and other Palestinian groups carried out more than 150 suicide attacks, killing about 1,000 Israelis. Only when Israel withdrew military forces from Gaza did these groups abandon the tactic almost entirely. Since then, the number of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank has grown by 50 percent, making it even harder for Israel to control the territories in the long run. There is every reason to think that Israel's renewed military occupation of Gaza—"for an indefinite period," according to Netanyahu—will lead to a new, perhaps larger wave of suicide attacks against Israelis.

## The Settler Problem

Although there are many dimensions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one fact helps clarify the complex picture. Virtually every year since the early 1980s, the Jewish population in the Palestinian territories has grown, even during the years of the Oslo peace process in the 1990s. The growth of settlements has meant the loss of land for the Palestinians and increasing concerns that Israel will confiscate more land to resettle more Jews in the Palestinian territories. Indeed, Yossi Dagan, a prominent settler and member of Netanyahu's party, has urged the creation of settlements in Gaza, where the last settlements were removed in 2005.

The growth of the Jewish population in Palestinian territories is a central factor in fomenting conflict. In

the years immediately after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the total number of Jews living in the West Bank and Gaza numbered only a few thousand. Israeli-Palestinian relations were mostly harmonious. No Palestinian suicide attacks and few attacks of any kind occurred during this period.

But things changed after the right-wing cabinet led by the Likud Party came to power in 1977, promising a major expansion of settlements. The number of settlers increased—from about 4,000 in 1977 to 24,000 in 1983 and to 116,000 in 1993. By 2022, about 500,000 Jewish Israeli settlers lived in the Palestinian territories, excluding East Jerusalem (Al-Quds), where an additional 230,000 Jews resided. As the set-

tlements grew, the relative harmony between the Israelis and the Palestinians dissipated. First came the creation of Hamas in 1987, and then the first intifada of 1987–93, the second intifada of 2000–2005, and continuing rounds of conflict between Palestinians and Israelis ever since.

The near-continuous growth of the Jewish settlements is a core reason why the idea of a two-state solution has lost credibility since the 1990s. If there is to be a serious pathway to a Palestinian state in the future, that growth must come to an end. After all, why should Palestinians reject Hamas and support a supposed peace process if doing so means only more loss of their land?

## A Lasting Peace

Only a two-state solution will lead to lasting security for Israelis and Palestinians alike. The goal should be to revive a process that has been dormant since the last negotiations failed in 2008, 15 years ago. To be clear, Israel should couple this political approach with a military one, engaging in limited, sustained operations against the Hamas leaders and fighters responsible for the October 7 attack. But it must adopt the political element of the strategy now, not later. Israel cannot wait until after some mythical time when Hamas is defeated by military might alone.

Those who doubt that a two-state solution can ever be reached are right that immediately resuming negotiations with the Palestinians would not reduce Hamas's will to fight. For one thing, the group is an avowed proponent of eliminating Israel. For another, it would be one of the biggest losers in a two-state solution, since a peace deal would almost certainly involve the prohibition of armed Palestinian groups aside from Hamas's main internal rival, the Palestinian Authority, which would likely enjoy renewed support and legitimacy if it secured an agreement that the majority of Palestinians supported. And even if a two-state solution is achieved, Israel will still need a strong defense capability, since no political solution can completely eliminate the threat of terrorism for years to come.

But that is why the goal now should not be to immediately put forward a final plan for a two-state solution—something that is simply not in the realm of

political possibility at the moment. Instead, the immediate objective should be to create a pathway for an eventual Palestinian state. Although skeptics claim that such a pathway is impossible because Israel has no suitable Palestinian partners, in fact, Israel can take crucial steps on its own.

Israel could publicly announce that it intends to achieve a state of affairs where the Palestinians live in a state chosen by Palestinians side by side with Israel. It could announce that it intends to develop a process to achieve that goal by, say, 2030, and will lay out milestones for getting there in the coming months. It could announce that it will immediately freeze settlements in the West Bank and forgo such settlements in Gaza through 2030 as a down payment that demonstrated its commitment to a genuine two-state solution. And it could announce that it is willing and ready to work with all parties—all countries in the region and beyond, all international organizations, and all Palestinian parties—that are willing to accept these objectives.

Far from being irrelevant to Israel's military efforts against Hamas, these political steps would augment a sustained, highly targeted campaign to reduce the near-term threat of attacks from the group. Effective counterterrorism benefits from intelligence from the local population, which is far more likely to be forthcoming if that population has hope of a genuine political alternative to the terrorist group.

Unilateral Israeli steps signaling a serious commit-

ment to a new future would decidedly change the framework and dynamics in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship and give Palestinians a genuine alternative to simply supporting Hamas. Israelis, for their part, would be more secure, and the two parties would at long last be on a path toward peace.

Of course, the current Israeli cabinet shows no signs of pursuing this plan. That could change, however, especially if the United States decided to use its influence. For instance, the White House could apply more private pressure to Netanyahu's cabinet to curtail indiscriminate attacks in the air campaign.

But perhaps the most important step that Washington could take now would be to jump-start a major public debate of Israel's conduct in Gaza, one that allowed alternative strategies to be considered in depth and that brought forth rich public information for Americans, Israelis, and people around the world to evaluate the consequences for themselves. The White House could release U.S. government assessments of the effect that Israel's military campaign in Gaza is having on Hamas and Palestinian civilians. Congress could hold hearings centered on a simple question: Is the campaign producing more Hamas fighters than it's killing?

The failure of Israel's current approach is becoming clearer by the day. Sustained public discussion of that reality, combined with serious consideration of smart alternatives, offers the best chance for convincing Israel to do what is, after all, in its own interest.