

American Geopolitical Strategy and the Israel-Hamas War

Description

For understandable reasons, much of the analysis of the war between Israel and Hamas focuses on concerns that are internal to the conflict: Is Israel's stated intention to destroy Hamas feasible; and if so, at what cost? How is it possible that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government allowed such profound degradation of Israeli state capacity and what will be the political consequences? Are these events the last nail in the coffin for the two-state solution, or might they be the crucible out of which renewed hope for peace emerges? Are there alternative entities that might be capable of governing Gaza in Hamas's absence and to what extent are the Palestinian people interested in such alternatives? But, compelling as these questions are, from the perspective of the United States, much of this analysis misses the forest for the trees.

The war between Israel and Hamas has serious implications for the emerging geopolitical order with stakes far larger than these local concerns. America's National Security Strategy sees "the most pressing strategic challenge" of the day as coming from countries like China, Russia, and Iran, "that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy." To meet that challenge, the National Security Strategy calls for building "the strongest possible coalition of nations." The United States needs a strategy for managing the war that focuses first and foremost on these geopolitics. Focusing on the domestic politics of the past 15 years in Israel and the Palestinian territories, I argue there is no politically feasible alternative to a long-run Israeli strategy of containment and deterrence directed at a Hamas-controlled Gaza. Given Hamas's increasing technological capacity, deterrence will come with heightened humanitarian suffering in Gaza, threatening détente with the Arab world and America's case for the rules-based order more broadly. US strategy should use increased defensive military aid, political leverage, and a pragmatic approach to humanitarian assistance to manage these dynamics.

Friendly relations between Israel, Arab countries, and the West are an important component of building a coalition of nations to manage security and economic competition with the China-Russia-Iran axis. In the past several years, wary of Iran, important Arab-league countries including Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, and Morocco normalized relations with Israel, as they sought to improve their strategic relationship with the West. More recently, normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia has appeared within grasp. As this normalization process approaches critical moments, it is vulnerable to disruption by spoilers. And, indeed, President Biden recently argued that this was precisely

Hamas's goal in attacking Israel. Absent détente with Israel, reliable realignment of the various pro-Western Arab states with the United States will be difficult because American domestic politics will likely keep the United States tightly connected with Israel for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, the rival axis is actively seeking its own openings in the region. Chinese firms in particular have been [actively involved in networking critical Saudi infrastructure](#), perhaps creating backdoors that could be leveraged for cyber-based coercion. Moreover, the geopolitical risk extends beyond the region. Important partners in Asia—from [Indonesia to Malaysia to Thailand](#)—are watching. For them, Israel's worst excesses in Gaza make American claims to stand on the side of a rules-based order that China eschews ring hollow, weakening our geopolitical case. Thus, it is important the United States has a clear-eyed understanding of what constitutes a realistic strategy for managing the geopolitical threat that this conflict poses. This requires an analysis of the constraints imposed by domestic politics, starting with Israel's.

The Israeli politics of the current war have their origins in the [Sharon government's 2005 disengagement from Gaza](#). That policy—in which Israel dismantled settlements, displaced settlers, and withdrew the army from Gaza—along with the building of a security wall that reduced the threat of terrorism from the West Bank and the creation of the Iron Dome air defense system, created a new political reality. Israelis no longer bore the burden of sending their children to patrol Gaza. And, for the most part, they felt safe and secure. Consequently, they disengaged politically from the Palestinians, abandoned any serious talk of a peace process, and gradually drifted rightward. The implicit bargain of Israeli politics for the past fifteen years has been that the electorate votes for the right and conservative governments provide a level of security that allows Israelis to go about their lives, ignoring the Palestinians and the occupation.

Seen against this backdrop, the first and most obvious observation is that the almost incomprehensible success of Hamas's attack on Israel is a political catastrophe for the Netanyahu government. In an important sense, they had only one job and they failed at it.

But there is a second, less obvious, and more important, implication. The political failing and potential consequences for some individual politicians notwithstanding, the Israeli electorate has available to it essentially no feasible alternative to the policy of disengagement. The Israeli left has been politically decimated. The [Palestinian Authority is a corrupt, degraded organization](#) that can barely assert control over urban centers in the West Bank. It is not a realistic partner for the sort of land-for-peace deals that were under discussion a generation ago, even if Israelis had an appetite for such negotiations, which they don't. And the religious-nationalist settler movement has leveraged its electoral and legislative alliance with the right, and the implicit threat of Kahanist terrorism, to expand its physical presence and intertwinement with the state's security apparatus in ways that make alternative paths all but

unimaginable. We are, therefore, almost certainly heading toward a medium-term future that looks much like a slightly modified version of the recent past: disengagement coupled with a reinvigorated Israeli focus on homeland security.

Considering these political realities, what should we expect that midterm future to look like?

First, for the same reason that motivated Sharon's original withdrawal, there will not be a long-run reoccupation of Gaza: the right's political case depends on Israelis not having to bear those costs.

Second, some Palestinian entity will remain in control in Gaza, and that entity will likely be Hamas or a carbon-copy organization. There simply is no viable alternative. The failing Palestinian Authority lacks the desire, the capacity, and the legitimacy to rule in Gaza. Israeli protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, this history of counterterrorism teaches us that destroying Hamas is not a realistic goal without a years-long campaign of destruction and death along the lines of the Sri Lankan fight to eradicate the Tamil Tigers. The Israelis will not go down that road. Dreams of the UN managing security in Gaza are a fantasy. Even if there were countries willing to send thousands of sufficiently well-trained soldiers to participate in a years-long operation involving urban peacekeeping in a conflict zone controlled by Hamas and contested by a variety of Islamic extremist groups, such a mission is not in the geopolitical interests of at least two permanent members of the security council, Russian and China. For all these reasons, Hamas, or its ilk, are with us to stay, and they are likely to be the only game in town.

Third, there will surely be a renewed Israeli commitment to security for the purpose of containment at the Gaza border. Some examples may include the elimination of work permits for Gazans to cross into Israel, the creation of a no man's land, defense against remote Hamas attacks, and a substantially heightened military presence. Some analysts interpret the success of the Hamas attacks as clear evidence that the Israeli strategy of containment and deterrence were fundamentally flawed. This is a mistake. The problem was not the security concept, it was domestic politics. Insulated from serious electoral competition or accountability by the decline of the left, the Netanyahu government abandoned meritocracy in favor of patronage and loyalty. The failings in intelligence and response reflect profoundly degraded leadership at senior levels within the bureaucracy that must be fixed. Moreover, captured by an alliance with extremist settlers in the West Bank, the government took its eye off the ball in Gaza. Securing the Gaza border will require reversing what appears to have been a disastrous redeployment of the IDF away from Gaza to support and protect these West Bank settlers. The settlers remain politically powerful, and it will be hard for right-wing governments to resist gradually slipping back toward acceding to their ever-increasing demands. The scale and horror of the Hamas attacks, however, have also shaken the Israeli electorate from their lethargy. It is hard to imagine an Israeli government believing it can get away with such a dereliction of duty again.

Fourth, given that Hamas is likely to stay in charge, at least in a de facto sense, there will have to be an increased emphasis on deterrence. This will primarily mean imposing higher costs in response to attacks coming out of Gaza. And this is where the geopolitical challenges come to a head.

With the [support of Iran](#), Hamas's military capabilities have grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. Its ability to execute a coordinated attack on Israel from the ground, air, and sea makes this obvious. Beyond that, Hamas has increasingly sophisticated technological capabilities. It has shown the ability to employ off-the-shelf drones, and many expect the use of precision-guided munitions, submersible drones, armor piercing explosive devices, and much more in the coming days. Absent an intense electronic warfare effort at the Gaza border, uses of first-person view drone technology developed in Ukraine mean Hamas will soon have precision targeting capabilities anywhere within a few kilometers of the closest point to the border that Israel tolerates its activity. Especially coupled with extensive tunnel network that use unwitting civilians as human shields and allow Hamas forces to operate in a manner hard to detect without on-the-ground intelligence, that means that, even with the creation of a no man's land, it will become increasingly difficult for Israel to provide its citizens the level of security they expect. Achieving an acceptable level of deterrence therefore may well require a substantial increase in Israel's military engagement with Gaza, largely in the form of aerial bombardments. That heightened activity, coupled with economic isolation, will impose tremendous suffering on Gazan civilians. And that suffering will inflame public opinion around the globe, especially in the Arab world, substantially complicating the domestic politics of detente for the Saudis and other potential partners.

America's strategy, thus, must focus on making the coming Israeli strategy of containment and deterrence as low-cost for Gazan civilians as possible. Our ability to do so would be substantially limited if the current war ignites a regional conflict. The primary risk here comes from Iran via Hezbollah. The United States must be prepared to act swiftly and decisively to deter any attempt at escalation. President Biden was right to deploy US military assets in ways that clearly signaled such intent. But beyond this immediate challenge, a realistic strategy for achieving Israeli security while limiting Gazan suffering rests on three pillars: defensive military aid, political leverage, and making humanitarian assistance feasible.

The United States must increase military aid to Israel, especially defensive technology that serves the mission of providing security while minimizing misery. Israel is going to need America's help suppressing drone attacks along the Gaza border—for instance, by defending in the radio spectrum to jam GPS and drone control signals. The United States has already stepped in to help Israel maintain the protections afforded by Iron Dome, and it will have to do more. If Iron Dome becomes too expensive, or Israel's overall security in the homeland is eroded by Hamas's increasing

technological sophistication, Israel may turn to a scorched-earth strategy that imposes horrifying, and geopolitically catastrophic, costs on innocent Gazans.

The United States must also maintain political leverage with Israeli leaders so that it can to curtail their worst excesses. Fortunately, America has considerable tools at its disposal for influencing Israeli decision-making. In addition to requiring defensive military technological assistance, Israel lacks strategic reserves of key weapons and depends on American resupply. It is important that the American government manage our own domestic politics in ways that make using such leverage credible.

Finally, the US must do everything it can to facilitate humanitarian aid reaching innocent Gazans in desperate need. This means more than just helping provide food and water. It requires ensuring Israel that a border that is porous to aid will not inevitably become a security risk. For example, America should offer technical support to screen goods going into Gaza more effectively for dual-use technology that might be repurposed by Hamas to generate mass fire.

The war between Israel and Hamas may appear a story of local counterterrorism or counterinsurgency of the sort that are no longer central to America's national security strategy. But it is not. It is a war with profound implications for the emerging global order. It requires an American strategy that treats it as such.

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Main Image: Commander of the U.S. European Command General Curtis M. Scaparrotti visits a captured Hamas tunnel, accompanied by Gaza Division Commander Brig. Gen Yehuda Fox, in 2017. (Matty Stern/U.S. Embassy Tel Aviv)

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