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Abstract

The recent attack by Hamas demonstrates an unprecedented level of capability and sophistication from the extremist militia, coupled with a significant intelligence failure on Israel's part. The IDF's vulnerability can be attributed to an expanding threat landscape and the evolving counter-intelligence tactics used by their adversaries. The rise of Iran-backed forces in the region, along with the increasingly covert operations by Hamas and similar groups, challenges Israel's intelligence capabilities. However, the pressing question now is not about the occurrence of the attack but how Israel should respond. Potential strategies for Israel to reestablish deterrence include maintaining direct control, transferring authority to the West Bank, or adopting a collaborative International-Arab governance model. Each option carries significant strategic implications. Direct Israeli control might strain its resources and lead to further conflicts. Handing authority to the West Bank Authorities could embolden extremist factions. On the other hand, a joint governance approach could upset regional power balances. Given these complexities, Israel might consider a two-pronged strategy: retaining limited territorial control in areas of Gaza adjacent to the Israeli border, while conducting special operations throughout the rest of

The October 7th Hamas attack on Israel forced the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to respond and take reactionary military measures, which include invading the Gaza Strip to restore order and deterrence. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has declared in response to the attacks that Israel, [“is at war.”](#) He later stated about the initial retaliatory airstrikes in Gaza, [“...this is only the beginning”](#) and [“That means that this is a long war...”](#) With the IDF surrounding the Gaza Strip and senior Israeli officials calling for an invasion what options does Israel have? As the world waits for Israel’s next move, only a few ways ahead exist and all of them have dramatic implications for the region. This article will explore four potential options for the IDF, then review the strategic implications of the situation, before examining the challenges of the post-war period.

As the IDF initiates a full-scale ground offensive into Gaza, four primary operations are on the table: operational patience, military occupation, invasion to establish a demilitarized zone (DMZ) then withdrawal, and surgical operations followed by establishing a DMZ. Each of these options seems feasible as Israel musters over [350,000 reserve troops](#) to complement the roughly 170,000 active forces already deployed around the country.

Operational Patience: This would entail the sustained bombardment of Hamas’s strongholds while buying time for several factors to fall into place. This option will prevent Hamas militia reinforcements from reorganizing and cripple any forthcoming attempts to assault Israel. It also buys time for the IDF to plan and train for an invasion, and for the US to posture Naval forces in the region. Additional time

targets and rescue hostages. This effort would encompass the targeting of strategic points such as tunnel systems, key leadership, and arms manufacturing/cache sites.

Israel possesses the requisite firepower and resources to execute any of these operations, although several factors could potentially influence their long-term viability of these options. Restoring and maintaining deterrence is a key objective for Israel. An inadequate response to this attack may embolden adversaries to launch more attacks. Limited damage to Hamas's military capability might not be sufficient to reestablish deterrence. Past events, such as the Hamas-Israel conflict of 2021 and the Israel-Hezbollah War of 2006, have demonstrated that militant groups, with support from their backers like Iran, can quickly recover from damages and resume their activities. Israel has a tightrope to walk between a proportionate response limiting international scrutiny with limited deterrence, and a more hard-hitting approach that sends a strong deterrence message, but engenders outcries of unwarranted violence.

International Sympathy: The international community agrees in condemning the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel, and for Israel to conduct an appropriate and measured response to deterring future attacks. However, current bombing operations has resulted in over [8,000 Palestinian deaths](#) and has started to erode international backing. Additionally, a prolonged strategic paralysis or extended military occupation risks even more civilian casualties, which may further limit international support. Additionally, as the humanitarian crisis in Gaza gets worst by the day, public opinion will inevitably turn against Israel. There have already been large [pro-Palestine protests around the world calling for a cease fire](#). As this situation worsens, it may make support from the United States to Israel less tenable. President Biden has already called for [14.3 billion in defense aid](#) to Israel on top of another [61.4 billion for Ukraine](#). It's unclear how long the U.S. public and lawmakers will continue to support such high amounts of aid sent abroad. Without support from the West, Israel could face financial troubles if it opts for a long-term occupation.

Fiscal Implications Israel, while militarily robust, must be judicious in its approach. Prolonged conflict, especially when relying on reserve troops, is financially burdensome. Furthermore, in the event of a complete Gaza occupation, significant financial commitment would be required to support its two million inhabitants and the reconstruction of the destroyed infrastructure. Failing to address this could exacerbate poverty, intensifying long-term issues such as further radicalization of groups in the region and turning world opinion against Israel.

Potential Rise in Extremism: History indicates that aggressive suppression of anti-Israeli factions often results in the emergence of even more radicalized groups. For example, the decline of the Amal Movement in Lebanon led to the rise of Hezbollah, and the weakening of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) established the groundwork for creation of Hamas in Gaza. Additionally, the

explosion at the al-Ahli hospital in Gaza spurred global reactions such as the [terrorist attack](#) in Brussels, Belgium, resulting in the deaths of two Swedish nationals, widespread riots directed at U.S. embassies in [Lebanon](#), as well as the U.S. military base in [Turkey](#), and [drone attacks](#) against the U.S. troops in Iraq. Clearly, there is strong potential for the current conflict to incite extremism and inspire further terrorist attacks in the West.

Diversion of Attention from Other Threats: While countering Hamas’s provocations is paramount for restoring deterrence, Israel also faces threats from multiple other fronts: Hezbollah in Lebanon, escalating tensions in the West Bank, and an increasing Shia militia presence in Syria, including factions like the Syrian al-Hussien brigade and the Iraqi PMF, which operate in proximity to Iranian IRGC Quds forces. A disproportionate focus on Gaza could inadvertently open avenues for surprise assaults from these fronts. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has spoken about these potential threats, particularly the one posed by Hezbollah. [He recently stated](#), “If Hezbollah decides to enter the war... It will be making the mistake of its life. We will strike it with strength that it cannot even imagine and the significance to it and to the country of Lebanon will be devastating.”

Furthermore, beyond the diversion of attention from local threats, there’s potential for distraction on



the global stage. A region-wide conflict would necessitate significant resources and mobilization from Western powers, potentially diverting attention from issues like Iran’s nuclear program, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and China’s aggressive posture toward Taiwan. Russia’s recent [offensive maneuvers](#), following months of a more defensive stance, coupled with the Chinese Air Force’s continuous [provocations](#)

in Taiwan’s airspace, serve as evidence that U.S. adversaries are willing to seize the opportunity presented by the West’s heightened focus on the Middle East. With the myriad of threats facing Israel, it must address several strategic challenges in the near future.

Despite the military methods Israel chooses to employ against Hamas militias, there are several long-term issues that Israel and its allies must prepare to address.

Rapid-Response Capabilities: Setting aside the reevaluation of intelligence measures, there are other military challenges that Israel should be mindful of, particularly concerning mobility and aerial defense. In the days leading up to the October 7th attack, the IDF deployed a significant portion of its troops into areas adjacent to the West Bank, especially Eastern Jerusalem, due to concerns over potential protests marking the anniversary of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Consequently, when the unexpected Hamas assault was launched, IDF troops had to be quickly [remobilized](#) from the West Bank and deployed to Gaza, compromising Israel’s rapid-response capability. This facilitated the escalation of Hamas militants’ initial advances. In this context, it is crucial to give special attention to Israel’s rapid-response

other regions, such as Lebanon, the West Bank, and Syria, potentially making way for unforeseen challenges. Furthermore, an occupation of Gaza could spark large-scale protests within the Strip, which could potentially extend to the West Bank and Arab-Israeli communities with a population exceeding [two million](#) people, possibly igniting another “intifada.”

Moreover, if Israel assumes control of Gaza, they might eventually need to claim ownership of the Strip, granting Gazan residents Israeli citizenship. This scenario could lead to significant demographic and societal shifts that Israel might not be prepared to handle. Presently, Arab-Israelis make up [about a quarter](#) of Israel’s population. Including Gazans would push this number past five million, representing over a third of Israel’s inhabitants. Given Israel’s democratic principles, this could lead to profound political transformations that might challenge the fundamental Jewish character of the nation.

Transfer to the West Bank Authorities: Another option would be transferring governance of the Gaza Strip to the West Bank Authorities, who are generally perceived as less radical than Hamas and more open to a long-term coexistence with Israel. This strategy, however, would require the West Bank Authorities to be able to govern the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

