



## Israel Remains Firm on Gaza Operations 100 Days After Start of War Against Hamas

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In the course of its ground operation in Gaza, since October, Israel has still not achieved its declared strategic objectives of defeating Hamas and freeing hostages. The withdrawal of some forces from the northern Gaza Strip, which began at the start of the new year, will do little to improve the current humanitarian situation for the civilian population given the continuing intensity of fighting in Hamas-controlled areas. Despite growing international pressure for a ceasefire, the Israeli government is trying to maintain its current strategy in the conflict with Hamas.

**Military and Humanitarian Situation.** The Israeli army announced at the end of December 2023 that it had broken up Hamas forces in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, where the Israeli Defence Forces had operated [since 27 October last year](#). This does not mean complete control of the area, as fighting is ongoing, but the command has begun to withdraw some forces from there and announced a reduction in ongoing operations. It also was reported that the current phase could last for most of 2024. Israel is continuing its ground offensive in central and southern Gaza. Those areas still have military structures of Hamas, which retains operational capabilities (including limited rocket attacks against Israel) and chain of command. Officially, Israel reports that it has killed 9,000 Hamas members, which would correspond to about one-third of its pre-war estimated personnel (not including other groups). Israeli military losses are reported to be 529 soldiers [since 7 October](#). Hamas authorities report total casualties (civilians and fighters) of about 24,000 dead and more than 60,000 wounded. Israel has also announced the elimination of Hamas leadership residing abroad, including its deputy political bureau chief, Saleh al-Aroui, who was killed in an attack on 2 January in Beirut.

The shift of the bulk of the fighting to the south of the Gaza Strip is exacerbating the humanitarian crisis of the civilian population, among which are also a concentration of refugees from the northern part. The UN reports that 85% of

the 2.3 million inhabitants of the Strip are displaced, with damage and destruction to infrastructure that includes an estimated 60% of residential buildings. Humanitarian aid distribution remains very difficult or impossible due to the ongoing fighting and strict Israeli border controls, and aid agencies report increasing malnutrition and the risk of disease spread. The prospects for an extended humanitarian pause and a possible agreement to return residents to the northern part are linked by Israel to the issue of the release of hostages held by Hamas (136 people, including 27 dead). So far, the parties have only agreed once to implement a ceasefire and prisoner exchange, which took place from 24 November to 2 December last year, and a deal was worked out in January for the transfer of medicine to the hostages. Attempts by the Israeli military to free the hostages by force have failed.

In the context of the regional repercussions of the Gaza war, the level of armed escalation between Israel and pro-Iranian forces has also increased since the beginning of this year. In relation to Hezbollah, it is primarily linked to the attack on al-Aroui in Beirut, as well as to Israeli airstrikes in southern Lebanon that killed senior Hezbollah commanders. In response, Hezbollah has increased rocket fire on Israeli territory, targeting, among others, the military outpost on Mount Meron. At the same time, Yemeni Houthi activity is expanding, although it is more focused on [destabilising maritime operations than direct attacks on Israeli targets](#).

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**Political Aspects.** Benjamin Netanyahu's government maintains its existing objectives in the war against Hamas, which include the liquidation of the terrorist forces, the release of hostages, and ensuring that Gaza ceases to be a source of security threats for Israel. The continuation of the war still has high public support (66% do not support a reduction in its scope); at the same time, polls show a very high level of distrust in the prime minister (80% expect him to resign when the war ends) and predict the defeat of his political camp in the event of early elections. The families of hostages and internally displaced persons from the border areas with Lebanon and Gaza are a strong pressure group. After a [period of suspension related to the outbreak of war, previous disputes are returning to current politics, including protests calling](#) for Netanyahu's resignation. A significant development for the future domestic situation is a Supreme Court ruling rejecting the government's reforms aimed at trimming the court's competences, which was the subject of a [fierce political and constitutional crisis in 2023](#). In addition, the government's is affected by tensions within the coalition, mainly arising from the decisions and rhetoric of its far-right members, who are opting for the harshest possible policies towards the Palestinians, including calls for ethnic cleansing. At the economic level, an economic slowdown is expected due to, among other things, problems in the labour market (mobilisation of about 8% of the workforce, lack of foreign workers) and a halt in investment, for example in the [high-tech sector](#).

Increasing international pressure is mounting on Israel to halt its operations in Gaza due to the very high number of civilian casualties and the looming humanitarian catastrophe. The most substantial element of this is the complaint submitted on 29 December 2023 to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) by South Africa, which accuses Israel of the crime of genocide and demands that the ICJ, as an interim measure, among other things, order a cessation of hostilities. There has been a strong push by the United States for a change in the tactics used so far in Gaza, although the Biden administration has so far chosen not to weaken its support for Israel. An additional point of contention is the [growing tensions in Israel's relations with the Palestinian Authority \(PA\)](#) due in part to the ongoing intensive operations by the Israeli army in the West Bank, where about 350 Palestinians have been killed in clashes since 7 October. An additional long-term challenge is the very high increase in public support among Palestinians in the West Bank for Hamas, as recorded in November-

December polls (up from 12% to 44% since September) and the 7 October attack (82%).

Responding to calls from foreign partners (especially the U.S.) to develop a [political plan for the future of Gaza](#) is a proposal put forward in early January by Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant. Assuming success in eradicating Hamas, it rules out administration of the area by Israel as well as by the PA. Local authorities not linked to Hamas would take over the Strip's management. Support is to be provided by an international force involving the U.S., European countries, and selected Arab states. At the same time, Israel is to retain full capacity to act in the event of security breaches, as well as border control. In addition, a strongly emphasised element of the authorities' statements is a scenario of the creation of an additional buffer area on the Palestinian side of the Gaza border, which would further reduce the territory available to the Palestinians. Israel is also seeking to change [the situation in southern Lebanon](#) and force Hezbollah forces away from the border.

**Conclusions and Outlook.** For the Israeli government, cessation of the Gaza military operation at this point is tantamount to handing victory to Hamas, and hence, Israel will continue its military operations. It is doubtful that Israel will comply with a possible ICJ call for a ceasefire as a precautionary measure, which places an additional political burden on its allies and reinforces anti-Western attitudes among states in the [Global South](#). A longer humanitarian pause remains at this point mainly dependent on a deal for the hostages. At the same time, any action perceived as supportive of the Palestinians (including in relations with the PA) is a lightning rod for conflict within the government due to the attitude of the far-right.

At the diplomatic level, formal proposals on the future of Gaza remain limited but may provide a reference point for further negotiations involving Arab states and the [EU](#). At the same time, the effects of the Israeli operation in Gaza, due to the scale of the civilian casualties, hinders the stabilisation of the area and fuels radicalisation and an escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (e.g., in the West Bank) and elsewhere, further deteriorating the security situation for the region and its immediate neighbourhood. It is imperative that EU states strengthen their pressure on Israel to expand access to material aid in the Gaza Strip, increase support for humanitarian organisations there, and, at the political level, maintain clear opposition to calls for forced migration or territorial changes.