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Israel's window of legitimacy in Gaza is shrinking (economist.com)

Dread and delays

## Israel's window of legitimacy in Gaza is shrinking

The Middle East is poised for war



image: afp

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On Israel's northern border with Lebanon, in the Upper Galilee, the air is heavy with acrid smoke as shelling ignites forest fires. Civilians have been evacuated and soldiers in helmets guard the junctions. Every hour or so, Hizbullah missiles explode inside the border, and Israel launches a counter-barrage aimed at the Iran-backed militia. This is a country poised for war. To the east Israel is bombing Syrian airfields thought to be used to ship arms to militants. To the west an American aircraft-carrier strike group floats in the Mediterranean, with a second on its way to the region, to try to deter Iran and its proxies. In the south a vast Israeli invasion force awaits an order to enter the battle grounds of Gaza.

Fifteen days after Hamas's attack on Israel, that ground invasion has yet to begin. One reason for the delay is a desperate flurry of last-minute diplomacy. On October 20th two American-Israeli hostages were released by Hamas after talks brokered by Qatar. A day later an international conference in Cairo called for a cease-fire. A limited amount of aid is now flowing across from Egypt into Gaza and negotiations over more hostage releases are ongoing.

The delay also reflects debate within Israel's government about what kind of war it wants to fight: hard and fast, or patient and long? On October 19th field commanders finalised operational plans and the war cabinet met in Tel Aviv. After seven hours, the meeting chaired by Binyamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, ended inconclusively. Strained relationships and stress may be impeding decision making. The impetuous defence minister, Yoav Gallant, supported by some generals, wants to rush into another short, sharp war. Mr Netanyahu is chronically hesitant.

But Israel is also under pressure from allies to recalibrate its plans and move away from its customary approach of rapid shock-and-awe offensives to a more restrained, longer campaign. On October 22nd Anthony Blinken, the secretary of state, said US military advice to Israel was "focused on both how they do it and how best to achieve the results that they seek" while acknowledging that "Hamas is an active threat and that needs to be dealt with".

Every Israeli war is fought watching the clock, as international condemnation grows and eventually America qualifies its support. In 1973 America urged a ceasefire ending the Yom Kippur War despite Israeli forces being on the advance. In 2006, it imposed a ceasefire before Israel could achieve its objectives in Lebanon. As one Israeli official puts it, "our window of international legitimacy is limited."

That usually points towards using maximum force to inflict punitive damage and re-establish deterrence fast before the window closes. This time may be different.

Israel's stated aim is expansive: to destroy Hamas's capabilities and remove it from power. That means laboriously clearing a 500km labyrinth of tunnels and house-to-house fighting. One general involved says "to completely eliminate Hamas' capabilities to launch rockets you must eliminate the rocket operators", who often fire from civilian buildings. In 2016-17 it took Iraq, with help from a coalition, nine months to destroy Daesh in Mosul, a city of 2m people before it was occupied.

America also appears to want a longer, more restrained campaign. Optically Mr Biden could not be more supportive of Mr Netanyahu's government. "I am a Zionist," he told the war cabinet on his visit to Israel. The president is asking Congress for a \$105bn emergency funding bill that includes \$14bn for Israel, and America continues to build up forces in the region: on October 21st it said it would deploy additional Patriot air-defence battalions and a thaad anti-ballistic missile battery. Mr Biden is also giving diplomatic cover: on October 18th America vetoed a draft un Security Council resolution calling for a "humanitarian pause" and on October 21st it proposed one asserting Israel's right to self defence. Nonetheless the White House is also clear it expects Israel to comply with the laws of war and to minimise civilian casualties. Mr Biden has urged Israel that "while you feel that rage, don't be consumed by it".

Finally Israel's war cabinet may be weighing the response in the Arab world. A very rapid further rise in civilian casualties in Gaza would be more likely to trigger a response from Hizbullah and Iran, and the second front that Israel dreads. On October 19th, the launch of missiles towards Israel from Iranian-backed militants in Yemen served as a reminder of the explosive potential of Iran's various proxies (they were intercepted by the American navy). As importantly it would lead to a deeper estrangement with the Arab states with whom Israel had improving ties before the attacks on October 7th, including the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Saudi has implicitly kept normalisation of diplomatic relations on the table.

A more controlled, longer campaign would still carry huge risks for Israel. Its forces could get bogged down: in 2014 soldiers got trapped in Shujaiyeh in northern Gaza and had to be protected by heavy artillery. Eado Hecht, an Israeli military analyst, has warned of 40,000 fighters from Hamas and other groups who will "conduct a deadly game of hide-and-see with our forces for a long time". Prolonged mobilisation will hurt the economy: the reservists are a large proportion of the workforce, as are hundreds of thousands of Israelis who have had to evacuate the areas near Gaza and along the border with Lebanon. After long periods of national mobilisation in the wars of 1973 and 1982, the country suffered prolonged recession.

The best way to try to extend Israel's "window of legitimacy" with its Western and Arab allies would be to signal that it is prepared to participate in some kind of plan for the Palestinians if it succeeds in removing Hamas. On October 21st Mr Biden tweeted "we cannot give up on a two-state solution". Gaza would need a credible Palestinian administration, with the backing of Arab nations, in order to rebuild and ensure Hamas does not return. Here Mr Netanyahu who is fighting for his political survival is doing his country no favours by denying, as he did on October 21st, that the preferred long-term solution for Gaza is to re-establish the control of the Palestinian Authority (pa), which rules in the West Bank and has condemned the Hamas attacks. Mr Netanyahu is the architect of the two-decade strategy of ignoring and isolating the Palestinians, and dividing them between Hamas-ruled Gaza and the West Bank run by a weakened pa. That failed approach is one of the reasons Israel is about to go to war against Hamas. Israel's lack of a plan for the Palestinians could also now compromise its ability to sustain a long campaign.