

Gaza's future

Hamas talks a big game but is in chaos

Look beyond the latest bravado and brutality and it is bitterly split



Photograph: AFP

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EVEN before the fighting stopped, Hamas was keen to show it had survived. Uniformed militants emerged from hiding hours after the Islamist group agreed to a [ceasefire with Israel](#). Once the truce began, Hamas was quick to deploy police on the streets and gunmen to guard aid convoys. The release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, in exchange for Israeli hostages, has been a fillip for its popularity.

Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, promised a “total victory” over Hamas. That was never a realistic goal, especially since he also refused to discuss who else might govern Gaza after the war. The day after has now arrived, and with no alternative waiting in the wings, the inevitable is happening. Hamas is rushing to reassert control over the territory it has ruled since 2007. Its leaders sound exuberant—at least in public.

In private, they are arguing bitterly. The war has deepened a longtime struggle between the group’s political and military leaders and has saddled it with enormous challenges. Gaza is in ruins; reconstruction will need tens of billions of dollars in aid. Israel is unlikely to treat Hamas with the same forbearance as it did before the October 7th massacre. The group has never been in such a fraught situation.

For years, Hamas was three things at once. It was a militant group with an estimated 30,000 fighters and an arsenal of rockets. It was Gaza’s de facto government, in charge of 2.3m people. And it was a force in Palestinian politics, the main opposition to Fatah, the nationalist party that runs the Palestinian Authority (PA). In the aftermath of a ruinous war, it can no longer play all three roles: its leaders must choose one.

The first path would be to focus on the military wing. Hamas would step back from running Gaza and appoint a group of technocrats to manage civil affairs. It would wield power behind the scenes, though, and work to rebuild its forces. Some observers call this the “Hizbullah model”, after the Shia militia which has long been Lebanon’s strongest power.

The idea appeals to hardliners within Hamas, which was never terribly good at governance. Before the war around 50% of Gazan students attended schools run by the UN, while aid groups distributed food and cash assistance, ran clinics and provided other basic services. Its military leaders would be happy to stick someone else with the impossible job of rebuilding. Yet much of the world would view such a “technocratic” government as a façade for Hamas’s continued control. Donors would be reluctant to fund reconstruction.

Nor would Hamas quickly regain its former strength. America's spies believe it has recruited almost as many new fighters as it has lost during the war, but its latest cadres are young and untrained. Most of the group's rockets are gone, either fired at Israel or blown up by Israeli troops. Replenishing its arsenal would take years. With Gaza's economy in ruins, Hamas can no longer rely on the taxes that once provided perhaps one-third of its revenue.

The second option is a return to the status quo ante: instead of fighting Israel, Hamas would focus on consolidating its control of Gaza. It might seek to break its international isolation by offering to forswear violence. Khalil al-Hayya, a member of the political bureau, has said Hamas is open to a five-year truce with Israel.

But Israel would be understandably sceptical of such promises—if the leaders of Hamas's military wing could even be convinced to make them. Truce or not, a Hamas-led government would scare off many prospective donors. Hamas would be left to grapple with the desperation of its own people, many of whom are already furious at its decision to drag Gaza to war. It would try to govern through fear (it has already begun executing alleged "collaborators", a catch-all term for its foes). But it would face constant challenges to its rule.

The third choice is the most pragmatic. Hamas would reconcile with Fatah, which it tossed out of Gaza in a coup in 2007. They would reunite the West Bank and Gaza under a unity government, an idea which has broad support among Palestinians. With the PA in control, Arab and Western donors would be far more willing to invest in rebuilding. There would even be hope for negotiations with Israel (albeit not with the current Israeli government).

Palestinians have heard such promises before, though. Hamas and Fatah have spent 20 years signing futile reconciliation deals. Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president and the leader of Fatah, does not trust Hamas (the feeling is mutual). For a deal to stick, Hamas would have to lay down its arms. That would deprive the group of its *raison d'être*. Its leaders worry that another militant group would emerge and accuse them of going soft—much as Hamas once did to Fatah.

Hamas is not the only group in the Middle East grappling with such a dilemma. Hizbullah will have to make similar choices. In post-Assad Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is trying to make the transition from rebels to rulers. [Turkey](#), the main backer of HTS, may seek to push Hamas down a similar path.

But Hamas's foreign sponsors are divided too. Iran would prefer its militants to remain such (though it is cross with the group for launching a war without prior notice). Qatar would prefer it to focus on politics. Other Gulf states simply want it weakened. Hamas needs someone to rebuild its shattered enclave—and whoever does will have a big influence over its future direction. "We missed the opportunity during the war to build an alternative," says one Israeli official involved in the ceasefire negotiations. "But there is still an opportunity in the talks over reconstruction of Gaza to influence a new structure where Hamas is squeezed out." ■