

# The Future of Hamas Without Gaza

By Ryan Bohl

Senior Middle East and North Africa Analyst at RANE, Stratfor

9 MIN READ

Dec 27, 2023



Palestinian Hamas militants are seen during a military show in Gaza City, Gaza, on July 20, 2017. (Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

For over 15 years, Hamas' geographic core was Gaza, with the group's strategy being to manage control of the strip while using it as a base to confront and pressure Israel. But now it stands to lose that geographic core — and with it, the anchor of its strategy. How will Hamas adapt? Debate already swirls inside the group itself, which suggests Hamas, post-Gaza, may fracture like many other militant groups that fought wars they could not conventionally win.

## Internal Divides

Like many militant groups, Hamas is composed of different factions and wings united by an overarching ideology. Together, they believe in the idea of a Palestinian, Islamist state as a

broad principle, but there are subtle differences over how to get there and whether such a state needs to replace Israel entirely.

On the more hard-line side is the Izz ad-Din al Qassam Brigades, Hamas' armed wing, which is largely based in Gaza and responsible for the group's military strategy. The Qassam Brigades has long favored violent confrontation with Israel, believing that such battles strengthen Hamas' legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinians and force Israel into military campaigns that steadily isolate it from its allies.

Then there is Hamas' political wing, which is largely based in Doha, Qatar. This wing serves as the group's public face and engages in diplomacy on behalf of Hamas abroad. Under its influence, Hamas modified its 1987 charter, which rejects the existence of Israel, in 2017 to suggest that the group might one day be open to recognizing Israel. However, this modification was made over the objections of many within the militant wing who continue to publicly favor replacing Israel with an Islamist state.

The divide of opinion over the group's charter is just one example of other notable divisions. At the core, there is a division over the means to the end of Hamas' strategy. Should the group be confrontational and militant to the very end, or should it show flexibility to achieve its goals through less violent means? Should Hamas follow the path of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (which initially started as a revanchist militant outfit dedicated to the destruction of Israel but eventually moderated to become a legitimate governing partner and internationally recognized government), or should it chart a new path that involves long-term violent confrontation with Israel and its Palestinian rivals, believing that history has its back and that Israel will eventually be isolated from its allies to the point where it will weaken or collapse?

## The Militant View of Hamas' Future

Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel was partially an answer to these core questions — and one given by the group's militant wing, the Qassam Brigades, rather than its political one. Some reporting now indicates that the political wing in Doha was largely unaware of the planning

for the attack. This decision to keep the operation compartmentalized was likely, in part, aimed at ensuring the plot wouldn't be leaked to the Israeli military. But it also had a political dimension, as Hamas' Doha-based politicians might have opposed a war that would almost certainly cost them the only Palestinian territory they fully control. After all, the point of their struggle is to liberate Palestinian land, so why risk it?

For the militant wing, however, Gaza and its geography are not necessarily as important as Hamas' global and regional legitimacy. Instead, the Qassam Brigades is following a revolutionary model of geopolitics: causing as much strain and instability as possible until the systems that constrain Hamas from its goals collapse. The Oct. 7 attack was not designed to secure Gaza; rather, it was designed to cause maximum havoc and inspire a mass Israeli military response that would alienate Israel from its friends and allies. The devastation incurred by the Palestinian people, meanwhile, would also ensure that Hamas had a new, large well of recruits to replace those it had lost in battle.

Already, there are signs that the Oct. 7 assault and the subsequent Gaza war are accomplishing some of these goals. Hamas has enjoyed a surge of support in the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli military have struggled to contain unrest. U.S.-Israeli relations, meanwhile, have hit a century-low, with the administration of President Joe Biden openly criticizing Israeli cabinet members like National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir — and will likely be strained further still amid the ongoing Gaza conflict, suggesting that Hamas' tactics might finally drive that wedge between Israel and the West needed to severely weaken the former.

But there are clear problems with this approach. For one, Hamas' current war with Israel cannot be its last in order for this strategy to work. The group will need to cause more damage to Israel and provoke more military overreactions to gain the diplomatic and political advantages that Hamas seeks. That would likely mean wars fought in Lebanon and the West Bank at the very least. Such wars would be unwelcome for the citizens who would have to endure them, as it has been unwelcome for the Palestinians living in Gaza who are starting to show signs of blaming Hamas, as well as Israel, for their current pain and

suffering. Hamas' militant wing may be able to start wars but over time could risk losing the peace as Palestinians — and Arabs and Muslims across the region — turn against the militants for regularly bringing about misery on them.

Then there is the question as to whether the West would ever isolate Israel enough to substantially force it to change its Palestinian policies in a way that favors Hamas. It's one thing for the West to pressure Israel to provide a state to the Palestinian Authority, but it's quite another for Western governments to push Israel to enable the rise of an unrepentant Hamas. There is a reason some Hamas ideologues believe they can achieve this: they think of Israel as a Crusader state, which could only survive so long as it maintains external support from the West.

There is a reason some Hamas ideologues believe they can achieve this: they view Israel as a modern-day Crusader state that can only survive so long as it maintains external support from the West. But unlike the fallen kingdoms that were established in the Levant following the First Crusade in the 11th Century, Israel is a nation-state that has nuclear weapons and millions of citizens without a clear place to go. For both practical and political reasons, the West is thus unlikely to ever isolate Israel to the point where it would collapse. Some other activists have pointed to Israel as being like South Africa in the early 1990s, where Western sanctions were successfully able to overturn apartheid. But this too has limits given that within Israel itself, Israeli Arabs already have political rights. The West may yet push Israel hard to allow the creation of a Palestinian state, but it is unlikely to object to Israel ensuring that such a state is not run by militants like Hamas.

Meanwhile, Hamas' politicians have a slightly different approach. If Hamas assumes the role of being the leader of the Palestinian people, it will have to accept some compromises with Israel — like abandoning the group's open-ended armed struggle against the country. The most important compromise would be to accept Israel's right to exist, followed by pledges of non-violence and political participation in the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) that would allow Hamas to take control of the Palestinian national movement. This possible scenario is what is driving recent comments by Hamas officials

that they might be willing to reconcile with Fatah, the dominant political party within the Palestinian Authority, if it led to Hamas being included in the PLO. And in the longer run, this strategy is likely to eventually win backers in the West, who could then become champions for Hamas' cause and give the group a diplomatic opening to gain ascendancy in the PLO.

But Hamas' militant wing will likely oppose this plan — and so too will Iran, the group's primary backer, which sees the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a useful diplomatic and political vehicle to advance Tehran's interests across the region. Iran's opinion will matter more in the post-war situation as well: now that Hamas' bases will be in Lebanon and Syria, not Gaza, Iran will have substantial leverage to shape and modify Hamas' behavior and reshape its policies to work underneath Tehran's own regional strategy.

## A Fractured Fate

Under this dynamic, a substantial split within Hamas could appear. Without a central geography to anchor the group, in the post-war era, there may be deepening divisions between its politicians in Doha (and wherever else they may end up should Qatar feel the need to expel them), its surviving militants in the West Bank and Gaza, and its near-abroad militants in Iranian-dominated territory in Syria and Lebanon. Hamas politicians would likely continue to pursue their diplomatic strategy as the militants in the West Bank and Gaza fend off an insurgency. Hamas fighters in Lebanon and Syria, meanwhile, may end up increasingly under Iran's so-called "axis of resistance," a network of militias that comprise just one aspect of Tehran's regional strategy. This will likely lead to incoherence and increasingly public fractures within Hamas, and could even portend the creation of splinter groups based on the geography Hamas fighters reside in.

It would not be the first time a militant group befell such a fate. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, al Qaeda stopped being an international organization and started to become a

regionalized one. So too did the Islamic State after its defeat in Syria and Iraq. Neither movement vanished, but neither emerged from their wars unscathed, with both al Qaeda and the Islamic State now split into factions and chapters more focused on local goals rather than a grand strategy.

Hamas may similarly splinter into new factions, some more radical than others, particularly in the West Bank and Gaza. This would mean a weaker Hamas overall, with the divisions hampering coordination, and possibly even presaging a formal break-up of the group based on its fighters' different geographies. But such a break-up could also free up Hamas' different factions to carry out individual imperatives; the political wing, for example, would be less constrained by the militants in Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza.

Regardless, this new era presages another complication of the Palestinian political scene — one that will guarantee more violence in the future as the underlying drivers of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain unaddressed, complicating the peace process.